



Nurse
Becky
Gets
SHOT

Gary Baker

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black comedy crime caper.

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NURSE BECKY GETS SHOT

PART ONE

Chapter 1

Roger Peerson's mind let him focus on the reflection. A man dressed as a bank manager looked back at him. His tie blown over his shoulder.

Is that me?

He turned his head to the right, pulled the tie straight. The brown haired reflection did the same.

That's me. Seventeen spots on the tie.

People walked behind him. The reflection came from a chemist's window. He was in a shopping precinct. Lots of brick.

The sun was low, still warm. His clothes stuck as he moved. Sweat cooled his forehead.

He noticed a shabby figure squatting against a wall; broom handle legs folded impossibly tight, a dark cowl of dreadlocks, ancient boots.

Looks so thin. Mr Thin, you look worn out.

Roger patted his pockets, looking for change.

Mr Thin's inner right forearm flashed a silver, red and blue dagger coiled about by a green and yellow serpent. Colours dimmed by dirt and time.

Hints of dark blue whorls and words poked from under sleeves and torn trouser.

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The left arm, inner forearm, what does that say? Roger stepped forward, cocked his head, hard to read Gothic script, KOPALDA.

Roger recoiled, staggered back into the path of a young woman explaining why she was late into her mobile phone: 'The bloody train was cancelled again.' Her elbow caught him in the ribs, the phone arced from her hand, smashing into three pieces on the concrete paving.

Battery, phone body, battery cover.

'Fuck!' The woman stopped, stood feet together, heavy chested body tilted forward at the waist, hands held as if she had just let go of a tray of hors d'oeuvres.

Roger and the woman looked, unmoving.

Battery, phone body, battery cover.

A faint smell of garbage broke the spell. 'Sorry.' Roger stooped to retrieve the battery. 'Let me.' The phone.

The battery cover had landed close to Mr Thin's begging bowl. Roger paused.

The women said, 'I was on the phone?'

Up-speak. So irritating. 'Sorry. Yes.' Roger handed her the two pieces. She pointed at the remaining part. Eyebrows raised.

'Excuse me, I just ...' said Roger. He reached for the last piece, met a quick green gaze.

'Nice tits,' whispered Mr Thin.

Alcohol smell.

'What?'

It was coming back. The alcohol smell. Tits? No.

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Crudeness. The crudeness of the remark felt familiar. Roger's neurons itched with memories just out of reach.

The Salvation Army. That's it. Lenny. Lenny with the dust bunny hair, sat on a creaky bed. He'd just sloshed whisky onto his lap. Too busy laughing at his own joke.

Roger straightened up holding the final piece of the phone.

The tattoo. KOPALDA.

Roger thrust the battery cover into the woman's hands and ran.

*

Four weeks earlier:

Roger looked up at the Salvation Army Citadel building dizzyingly framed by low scudding clouds. He hesitated before hammering on the double doors with the side of his fist. The noise hardly seemed to penetrate the cold layers of red paint.

His feet hurt. He'd walked for hours. He'd left under a low, black sky which was now an uncertain grey. He'd left Harry. And the house. And Julia.

There'd been a fight with Julia? Hard to remember.

Roger had cried for the first fifteen minutes of the two hour walk. Stumbling along grass verges, past uncaring traffic, hard pavements and unforgiving curbs.

Roger hammered again.

No answer. Where will I go if it's closed?

The door opened inwards. Movement to Roger's left grabbed his attention. A figure. Nothing. Roger turned back to the door.

A woman stood and looked at him. Plump, white

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blouse, grey skirt, black stockings, grey eyes.

'Yes?' She'd opened one side of the double doors completely. Stood square and full on.

God this was difficult.

Roger felt the tightness round the back of his head; a closing in, squeezing, tunnel vision, tears. He swallowed the lump in his throat, placed a hand over his pounding heart, said, 'I'm sorry, but I ... need help.' His legs gave way. He fell to his knees. Sobbing.

The other Rogers, Roger's other minds, looked on as Roger A clutched his gut and folded under the pain, dripped tears and snot onto the sandstone steps. Roger B wished the silly sod had managed to stay on his feet. But it felt good to let go a bit. Wonder if she's wearing stockings.

Roger C recalled when his mum had phoned telling him of the death of his brother from testicular cancer. His legs had given way in the hallway of that flat he used to live in. The one in West Hampstead. What was the number?

Roger felt a hand under his arm. Heard words. Smelled buttered toast and Chanel Number 5. Julia used Chanel Number 5.

Roger A sobbed, did more breathing out than breathing in, struggled to his feet. God it hurt. Roger B wondered how many coats of paint were on the door. Felt hungry for toast. Roger C searched for more memories.

The woman was brusque. 'In here. Sit down. Are you going to be sick?'

Now in a bright corridor. Roger sat on a wooden

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bench. Took a deep breath. 'It's alright, I'm not drunk,' he said at last, 'I'm just tired and emotional.' Surprising himself, Roger smiled at the political euphemism.

'I'm Janice Deal,' she said, returning his smile. 'Just sit there for a moment.' Janice leaned forward, placed a hand on Roger's shoulder and held his gaze. 'I have to finish a phone call.' A gentle Geordie accent.

The weight of the hand on his shoulder and held eye contact caused a quick unease in Roger. Very serious phone call, he thought dismissing the intimacy. 'Thanks. Thank you. I'll be fine. Really.'

Janice walked quickly along the corridor, paused to glance back at Roger then turned into a room.

Roger rested the back of his head against the wall. Closed his eyes. Deep breaths. Concentrate on the breathing. Deep breaths.

God, what have I done.

A chilly wind coming through the open door reminded Roger his face was streaked with tears and snot. He rose to push the door closed rubbing his face on his sleeve. The impression of a dark figure half in and half out of the doorway ducked outside and out of view. Mild surprise. Embarrassment. Had they seen him crying? Roger stepped outside. It was too early for pedestrians. The street was deserted except for one shabby car coughing by. He could go back. Julia would take him back, surely. He'd see Harry again. The thought of Harry brought back the tightness at the back of Roger's head. Harry wondering where his dad was. Why has dad gone? I want dad. Who will play Duel Monsters with me?

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Harry crying. Da-ad. His innocence cracking. His confusion. His tears.

Roger felt it coming back.

God, it hurts.

Pull yourself together man. Roger B made him close the door then sit down. Wipe your face again. Come on, breathe deep. Close your eyes. Just breathe. Small steps. It will go away. One breath at a time.

Hungry.

One breath at a time.

Roger felt a pressure on his arm. What was her name again? Janice.

'Now, what's the problem?'

'I'm sorry,' said Roger.

'Don't be.'

'This isn't like me.'

'I'm sure it isn't.'

'I just didn't know where else to go.'

Janice sat patiently by Roger's side perched on the edge of the bench. Ankles crossed beneath her. Wrists crossed on her lap.

'This sounds so pathetic. I feel so stupid.' Roger pulled and wiped at his sleeves, conscious of the gooey coating, then launched himself into his explanation. 'I've had a fight with Julia. It was a big one. I have a son. Harry. It's become impossible. It's best, for Harry, that I leave before ... Well, things were being thrown about, Harry was crying his eyes out. It really is the end. It's been going on like this for too long now. I had to leave. I've been walking for hours. All night. Town is deserted.

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I sat in the hospital for ages. In the waiting room. Nowhere else to go. I've left Harry.' Roger paused, unable to breathe in. 'It hurts,' he managed at last. 'I had no idea it would hurt so much.'

'Take your time.'

A memory surfaced of its own accord. 'She accused me of not trying hard enough.' Roger lifted his right hand. 'I swear to you it's not true.' Roger looked into Janice's eyes. 'I swear it's not true.'

Janice nodded.

Roger saw she believed him.

Another memory. 'Someone, I don't know who, she wouldn't say, someone told her I'd been seen booking into the Holiday Inn in Middlesbrough with some young blonde.' Roger shook his head. 'It's just unbelievable.'

A distant mobile telephone started to play Jerusalem. Janice placed her hand on Roger's arm. 'Go on,' she said.

'No. You'd better answer that.'

Janice examined Roger's face for a moment. 'Yes, please excuse me,' she said gently. 'You just sit here and relax. I'll be back in just a minute. Then we'll sort you out, all right?' She stood and walked quickly along the corridor once more turning into the room. The mobile hymn stopped.

Roger sat and nursed a dull ache behind his sternum.

She said for him to sit and wait. She would sort him out. He didn't have to think. He closed his eyes. There were no memories before the walking. Only what

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he'd told Janice Deal. Shouldn't we be more concerned? They'll make themselves known when they're good and ready. Don't think now. Especially don't think about Harry. It hurts. Let things happen.

*

The Darlington Salvation Army Social Services were in a different building; five minutes walk along North Road's grey, uneven paving slabs from the Citadel building.

Roger had fallen asleep where he sat so Janice had put on her plain black overcoat, gently woken him up and guided him along the pavement talking all the way. Roger took in nothing Janice said. Content to be guided. Not have to think.

*

Signed in and sat on a creaking cot in a room full of cots. This was more like Roger imagined the Salvation Army to be. A room full of cots. Not beds. Metal bed-like things with springs and thin mattresses. A smattering of them filled with grubby snoring lumps.

Roger lay down trying, unsuccessfully, to minimise the creaking.

Sleep.

*

'... Till we have built Jerusalem

In England's green and pleasant land!'

Roger woke with the last strains of Jerusalem fading in his thoughts. He felt stiff. Stretched.

'Hey.' A coarse male voice greeted Roger as he squinted against the light. Where on Earth am I? Oh, yes.

'So you're awake, like.'

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'I'm sorry?' said Roger trying to focus on the figure sat on the cot opposite. He grappled with the image: overexposed, underexposed, washed out, blurred, clear. A man sat facing him. Hugging one knee. Smoking. Beige, dirty beige clothes. Dust-bunny hair. The cigarette was a roll-up. It smelled good. Made Roger salivate.

'You were snoring like fuck.'

'Was I?' Roger sat up and swung his legs around to face the man. He stroked his chin. His new stubble made a satisfying rasp. Mr Dust-bunny opposite could do with a shave too, thought Roger.

'You got any money?' said the man.

Ah. A dilemma. How to react? Tell him no, risk his anger? Tell him yes, invite the next question? Ignore him? Be aggressive back? Roger looked him in the eyes. He was in a Salvation Army building. What could possibly happen in here? 'Yes, thanks,' he said, 'and I intend to keep it. Okay?'

'Hey,' the man leaned back arms open, palms up, all innocence, 'fuck. I was only going to say if you've got ten pence I'll show you where you can get a better tea than the piss they serve here.'

Roger stared at the floor. Unwanted thoughts were clamouring for attention.

A heavy hand slapped his shoulder.

'Come on,' insisted the man, 'let's go. Janice told me to keep an eye on you.' He stood gesturing for Roger to stand too. 'You're Roger. I'm Lenny. Lenny Ludhoe. Let me show you the fuck around. Okay?'

This would be easier. Let someone else lead. He

could just follow. Roger stood.

'Okay,' said Lenny dropping his cigarette then crushing it under a scuffed boot.

Roger followed where Lenny led. Tea here. Toilet. Newspapers. Introductions. The introductions were odd. 'This is Roger.' Handshake. How do you do. 'This is Roger.' But no reciprocating name. No, 'Roger this is Fred, Fred Roger.' 'Mary this is Roger. Roger, Mary.' Roger ended knowing their faces but not their names.

Maybe I'm just forgetting. Maybe ...

Then there was sitting. Sitting on a bench while someone preached. Singing. Preaching. Tea. Coughing. Biscuits. Hard bench.

At last, a coarse whisper from Lenny, 'Let's get the fuck out of here.'

'Why not,' agreed Roger, standing and rubbing his backside.

*

Darlington's concrete-grey evening sky washed the colour and detail from the mismatched buildings, creeping cars and pedestrians.

Lenny turned right heading north along North Road. The pair walked past a bed shop, its window placards pleading for their custom, an empty tool shop, pizza, insurance, on and on. Lenny was the eyes, the guide. Roger followed.

Down a side street. Bricks, litter, cans, bottles, dirt. The smell of rubbish made Roger realise an old theory he had about all towns and cities smelling the same, was wrong. The alleys of sunny Cape Town had smelled of

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rotting vegetables, hot tar and urine. As had Johannesburg. And London, when the sun shone. Hence the theory. Here, trudging a back street in Darlington, there was no smell of urine or hot tar. Just rotting rubbish.

A low flying jet startled Roger into looking up. It had already gone, leaving only a low rumble and an elevated heart rate.

Lenny had gone, too.

Ahead, a dark green door with frosted windows creaked and banged shut.

A pub?

Lenny was already at the bar when Roger joined him.

Without asking Roger what he wanted, Lenny ordered two pints of lager and two whisky chasers. 'I'm twenty pence short,' he said turning to Roger.

Roger fumbled in his pockets, found some coins then handed them to Lenny. Lenny picked out twenty pence then handed the remainder back to Roger.

Lenny downed his whisky in one. Roger felt he should followed suit, coughed like an adolescent and felt himself redden.

When was the last time he'd blushed?

They picked a corner table and sat facing each other.

'So what's your fucking story then?' asked Lenny pulling a pack of ten cigarettes from his pocket.

'Are you really interested?' What happened to the roll-ups?

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'Not really, but I've cancelled my booking to see Tosca tonight so I might as well listen to your tragic story in-fucking-stead, like.' He offered Roger a cigarette. Roger declined.

'I simply,' said Roger, 'find myself ... temporarily ... homeless.'

'Row with the missus?' Lenny asked quickly.

Too quickly, thought Roger. 'Something like that,' he said.

Roger took a sip of his beer. 'And you?' he asked Lenny wanting to change the subject.

Lenny sucked hard on his cigarette. 'Janet said you were pretty fucking upset when you arrived.' Smoke left Lenny's mouth with every syllable. 'You all right now?'

Janet? 'I thought it was Janice.'

Lenny snorted, 'Yes, I'm always getting her fucking name wrong. Janet. Janice. What the fuck. Listen,' Lenny stood, helping himself up with his hands on the table top, 'I'm going for a piss, all right?'

Roger sipped his lager. The comfort of the familiar. Lenny's fingernails were spotless. Long healthy tanned fingers and pink nails contrasting the dark, distressed-wood tabletop.

He watched Lenny head for an archway marked 'Gents'. That dust-bunny hair looks filthy. Spotless fingers though.

The world didn't seem authentic. Roger tried to think beyond Julia. A narrow memory-door cracked open. Roger had lived in and around Darlington for years but had never noticed this pub before. A pub for

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vagabonds and vagrants? He'd thought many times, half jokingly, he'd end up at London King's Cross carrying plastic bags and wearing trousers tied with string. Looked like it was happening. Don't think about Harry. Julia would manage. Don't think about Harry.

A male baritone bar-laugh went off like a canon somewhere out of site and degraded into wheezing coughing. A high-pitched female machine-gun bar-laugh, which hurt the back of Roger's eyes, followed close behind. Fresh cigarette smoke from unseen smokers drifted across to Roger, oblivious to its bad press. Smelled good. Could start smoking again. Stopped when Harry first came along. Don't think about Harry. Roger noticed the music for the first time since entering the pub.

'Hey mambo! Mambo Italiano!' Rosemary Clooney. Nineteen fifty-four.

Harry likes this tune. It was on a free compilation CD that came with the Sunday papers.

A heavy-set man and a mini-skirted blonde entered, crossing straight to the bar. 'Pint an a half of Carling,' he ordered pulling out a wallet from his back pocket. He looked round the bar.

Shaved head. One eyebrow had a piece missing. Fake scar?

The woman tugged at her skirt, trying to stop it from riding up. Chubby thighs. Slightly knock-kneed. Thin calves. Cherry red lips. Curly mock-blonde hair flat at the back and over-spruced at the front. Didn't she realise there are more views than just front on?

She leaned close to the big man saying something

which got a response that sounded like 'fuck off' but couldn't have been, surely. She looked nervous. Passed a silly small handbag from hand to hand. Tugged at her skirt. Why do women wear those things when they're clearly so uncomfortable?

A jagged voice sliced through Roger's thoughts. 'What you looking at, cunt!' The big man glared straight at Roger.

Someone behind me? Only a wall.

An adrenaline hit blanched Roger's face, caused his head to dither slightly.

The man advanced heavily towards him.

'I said: what you fucking looking at!'

Roger stood up. His right knee felt unsteady under him.

'I'm sorry?' Damn! His voice trembled. All those eyes on him.

The man bulldozed through a fairy-ring of small stools to within inches of Roger. 'I don't like your fucking face, cunt!' he spat, making Roger flinch from the flying spittle. 'You're eyeing up my fucking woman and you're not man enough to shag a fucking hamster!'

My God, why was this happening? 'Look -' began Roger. The man's left hand clamped around Roger's throat cutting the sentence dead. It hurt. Roger couldn't breathe. He grabbed the man's wrist. It was like grabbing a piece of scaffolding tube. Roger could feel panic taking hold.

Roger B thought, sod this, and brought his right knee up hard between the man's legs. The grip released.

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Roger could breathe. How does that feel, big boy?

Roger C was impressed. Nice one, but what happens now?

Roger staggered back gasping for air. He felt and heard his chair being knocked over. Something hit him hard in the face. He felt his lower lip give against his teeth. The last time he'd felt that was when he had been kicked in the face by a girl on a rope-swing when he was six years old. She'd swung across the brook and planted him with both feet. No pain. But a kind of rattled dizziness.

Roger didn't fall over when he was six and he didn't fall over this time either.

A high pitched scream. He made himself focus on the woman by the bar. She screamed again, wide eyed with both hands to either side of her face. Edvard Munch's The Scream, but with hair. What was she looking at?

Roger's aggressor was bent over in pain but had a gun. It looked toy-small in his hand. It was pointed at Roger.

'You fuck!' snarled the man straightening up and raising his arm.

Jesus.

'I'm going to fucking kill you, you fuck!'

A figure flew in from Roger's left. It was Lenny. He grappled with the man's arm. The gun waved about as the two men struggled.

'Help me!' shouted Lenny.

'Get off me you fuck!' yelled the man.

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Roger leaped forwards grasping for the gun, trying to turn it away. Turn it down. The three struggled and staggered. A threesome parody dance that turned and jerked, panted and cursed.

Rosemary Clooney belted out, *'Hey mambo, mambo Italiano. Hey mambo, mambo Italiano'*

Roger searched blindly among thrashing limbs. Where was the gun?

BANG!

Unbelievably loud. Deafening. Roger let go jumping back. His ears rang. Something hit his foot. The gun!

The big man ran from the pub. Lenny was looking back, open mouthed, towards the bar. Roger followed his gaze. The top left quarter of mock-blond woman's head was gone. She fell forward, legs stiff, smashing into the floor. Blood, flesh and brains splashed out. A grotesque, red, paintball hit.

Lenny pointed at Roger. 'My God,' he said, 'you've killed her.'

Everyone held their breath. Looked at Roger. Looked at the body.

Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, Jesus.

Lenny picked up the gun, took Roger's arm.

'It's a so delish a ev'rybody come copisha

How to mambo, Italianooooo!

'Ats nice!

UNH!'

'Come ON!' Lenny pulled at Roger.

Jesus.

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They ran.

*

Lenny insisted on calling back in at the Salvation Army Centre.

Sat opposite Lenny on his cot, Roger finally spoke. 'But I didn't pull the trigger. That ... lunatic did.'

'Maybe so,' said Lenny, keeping his voice low, 'but it looked to me like you shot the fucking gun then dropped it in a panic, like.' Lenny reached under his mattress and pulled out a half bottle of Bell's whisky and a small stack of plastic cups borrowed from beside the water cooler. 'And if that's what it looked like to me then chances are that's the way it looked to every other fucker.'

'But, that's ridiculous. I was just sitting there. This stranger suddenly started shouting at me for no reason.' Roger's mind a tumble-drier of thoughts. Round and round they tumbled. Sense evaporated out of them.

'He looked to me like he'd been kicked in the fucking nuts.'

There was the tiniest hint of pride in Roger's response. 'Well actually I did. I did knee him. But purely in self defence.'

'Somebody shouted at you so you kneed him in the fucking nuts? Not what you'd call very fucking diplomatic, like.'

'What was I supposed to do? He had hold of me. Round the neck.' Roger's own hand demonstrated the grip. 'I couldn't breathe, for Christ's sake.'

Lenny began to unscrew the top off the whisky bottle. A tattoo around Lenny's wrist caught Roger's eye

and he stared at it, not really seeing. Thoughts tumbling.

Lenny noticed the direction of Roger's gaze. 'KOPALDA,' he said. 'It's the name of a gang, from when I was a kid.'

Roger's tumbling thoughts made him feel ill. He shook his head. 'What?' he managed at last.

'Only kidding,' said Lenny. 'KOPALDA is an old girlfriend of mine.' He prepared to pour whisky into one of the plastic cups. 'Polish she was. Biggest fucking tits in Darlington,' he laughed. 'Very obliging. Buried in a Y shape coffin.' Lenny laughed again spilling whisky onto the cot.

Roger was not amused. 'That's all extremely interesting but ...' Anger took hold of him. 'We can't just sit here!' he shouted standing excitedly. 'We have to ...' Roger stopped, conscious of eyes. He was drawing attention to himself.

'What? Go to the fucking police?' said Lenny in a barely audible hiss. 'Own up to killing that innocent girl? And running away?'

'But I didn't do it. And even if I did it was an accident,' Roger hissed back. 'This is ridiculous.' He sat back down on the cot, leaned forward and put his head in his hands. What would Julia make of this? What is Julia to me, anyway? This is all wrong. What would Harry think? His dad is a killer. 'No, I'm not a killer. That ... man is. Not me.'

Lenny offered a plastic cup to Roger. 'Drink this,' he said. 'It won't make it go away but if you drink enough you won't give a fuck.'

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Roger took the cup. Gazed into it, didn't drink.

'Look,' said Lenny, 'no one knows who the fuck you are. Or me for that matter. I didn't know anyone in there at all. I don't think.' He poured a drink for himself. Took a swig. 'Won't be long before they come knocking on these fucking doors though. Might be prudent to repair to an alternate fucking venue, like.'

Lenny looked at the ceiling. Thinking. Came to a decision. 'Ever been to Hull?' he asked.

An image came into Roger's mind of an iron fireplace in the room of a small terraced house. A man with a bald head, hairy arms and a string vest told him stories of river expeditions, tireless black warriors and crocodiles, as Roger sat enthralled in a tin bath pushing dead skin and grime between his toes.

'Yes,' said Roger. 'When I was a child, a long time ago.'

*

'Hull,' said Lenny, 'the arsehole of Britain. Even the fucking name is depressing.'

Roger huddled beside him in the passenger seat of the red Peugeot Generic. His seat squeaked at every bump in the road and the rear axle protested with a low groan at every corner. He looked out at the bleak rows of typical semi-detached housing blanded even further by orange street-lighting and found it hard to disagree with Lenny. You could be anywhere, in any town in England. The outskirts of the vast majority of towns all looked exactly like this. Bleak at best. Great Britain. GB. Grimly Bleak. But there was an estuary somewhere low and to

the left in Roger's mind, an estuary where he'd hopped over sandy rivulets during a school trip. And somewhere a moor. A windy moor with an old Roman tower crumbling back into the heather. It had been fun. When was that? Roger braced himself as Lenny braked to avoid a bus pulling into the traffic.

'Jeez!' Lenny went on to complain more colourfully about all drivers of large vehicles.

The red Peugeot, driven by Lenny, had miraculously appeared two hours earlier in Darlington. Lenny's, 'Just nipping off to get a ride,' was obviously a euphemism for something Roger didn't like to think about. Even so, the offence of twocking was trivial next to ... murder.

And Lenny was a sign reader: 'A66 ... A1 South ... Barton 3 miles ... Scotch Corner ... Moto ... 24 hours ... Catterick ... Kirkby Fleetham ...' He read random number plates out loud too. Not just interesting combinations, but any his gaze happened across. The backs and sides of trucks were fair game, as were petrol prices and Travel Lodge charges.

But one word Lenny never uttered sat in the back seat like a giant Water Buffalo snorting with suppressed rage, primed to cause chaos and carnage at the mention of its name. Roger expected to hear the word at every junction, at every glance in the rear view mirror, emerging from every slip road. Police.

After half an hour's drive, Roger had finally snapped. 'Please stop reading out each and every poxy sign, for Christ's sake!'

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'All right, all right. Keep your fucking hair on, *killer*.' Lenny stressed the last word, twisting it like a child would sneer 'poopy-pants' or 'smelly-socks'; accusingly.

Roger, in an exaggeratedly mature tone said, 'I'm sorry, but I can see the damn things as well you can. You don't have to read out every bloody sign.'

'All right, all right. I get the message. Fuck me.'

But Lenny couldn't help himself. Couldn't stand so much silence. He was soon whispering each sign as they drained south towards Hull. His whispering slowly becoming normal speech.

Roger concentrated on blankness, managed to tune Lenny out, even dozed for a short time.

Lenny kept to the speed limit and his disparaging remarks about Hull were his first words spoken directly to Roger in over an hour.

'Keep your eyes open for a sign to Sculcoates,' said Lenny. 'I nearly always fucking miss it.'

Roger sat up shaking the sleep from his mind. Looking for signs. Harry was creeping back into his thoughts again.

Two birds with one stone: stop the thoughts and stop Lenny reading signs.

'Do you come to Hull very often?' Roger asked not expecting a reply of any substance.

'Half a dozen deliveries a year, probably.'

That was a lot more than Roger expected. 'You're a delivery driver?'

Lenny smiled. 'Well,' he began, pausing to

negotiate a turn, 'I like to think of myself as more of a fisherman.'

Roger knew he was supposed to ask Lenny to explain what he meant but elected to keep quiet knowing he would be told anyway.

'A fisherman,' said Lenny after a few seconds, 'tests out the water, sets out the bait, waits patiently then – wallop! Strikes, gathers up in the net and delivers to the kitchen a prize fucking specimen all ready to be cleaned, scaled, gutted, stuffed and presented for ... eating, mounting, or selling.'

Roger didn't think he could feel more uneasy, but he did. 'And am I for eating, mounting or selling?'

'You?' Lenny laughed. 'You're special, you are. You're a fucking *killer*.' That childish, sneering, accusing stress on the last word again.

The acid injustice of the word dripped on a nerve. Roger's unease flash-changed to anger. 'Stop the car!' he commanded. 'Let me out!' Be more forceful, demanded Roger B. 'Now! This instant!' shouted Roger.

'No fucking way. I'm not letting you out to go running around getting yourself caught and blaming everything on me, like. No fucking chance.' Lenny's tone changed, cutting through Roger's anger. 'Sit tight and don't even fucking think of getting out because I'll chase you down and cut your fucking head off. Right!?' He underlined his point by elbowing Roger hard in the chest making the car swerve and the tyres squeal.

The sudden violence caught Roger by surprise. He felt sick, unable to breathe, strained forward against the

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seatbelt.

The memory-door opened a fraction. The elbow in the chest, the sickness, were familiar sensations. A coach trip altercation had ended with a boy from another school thumping Roger hard in the stomach. He had not retaliated. Fear had kept him in his seat. An inaction Roger regretted through to his adult years.

But to retaliate against Lenny now would be stupid. He could lose control of the car. Roger B was not impressed, what would young Harry think if he knew?

Roger C pleaded, don't do it. It's not worth it.

'Why did you do that?' said Roger, sounding whiney even to his own ears. 'What the bloody hell did you have to go and do that for?'

'Just sit fucking tight and shut the fuck up,' said Lenny.

'Is that your ... types answer to everything? Violence?'

'Just calm down.'

'Calm down? Calm down? You just elbowed me in the chest for no bloody good reason and you want me to calm down.'

'Just calm the fuck down.'

'That's it isn't it? You're just a ...' Roger ran out of words. A heat rose from his belly. A furnace burnt in his chest. Dancing blue hot flames cauterised his brain. Injustice screamed in his head, filling it, threatening to bursting through his skull. He fought against his seatbelt then tore into Lenny's head with fists and fingers and bites. A whirlwind of rage and hurt. Unaware that Lenny

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had lost control and the car had mounted the pavement and thumped into a brick wall. He just wanted to tear out his eyes, rip off his head, see blood, kill him. Lenny managed to open the car door and struggle out. He was forced to drag Roger, still clinging to his coat, over the gear lever, across the driver's seat and out onto the pavement. Roger didn't feel the blows. Didn't care. Kill! Blood! Kill! Whirling punching kicking clawing, kill the bastard, never see Harry again, DIE YOU BASTAAAARD!

Exhaustion at last left Roger on his hands and knees on the pavement gasping for air.

'Fucking hell!' said Lenny bent over slightly out of breath. 'I'm impressed. If you weren't so unfit you could have fucking had me.'

Roger sank back onto his knees, breathing hard, his heart pounding in his chest. He lifted a finger and pointed up at Lenny. 'Don't you ever...' began Roger.

Lenny's right foot caught Roger hard against the side of his head knocking him into darkness.

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Chapter 2

The threat of rape made Jennifer Penrose considered suicide again.

They had shaved her head, stripped her naked and given her a hospital gown to wear. Taking away her clothes and hair had exposed *her*.

She tugged and smoothed the gown, coaxing it, begging it, to cover more of her thighs, back, buttocks.

They had shown her a handy-cam film of Loki talking to her mother; asking directions. Loki was not his real name. He was big, had fluffy brown hair, an accent from the North East somewhere, evil blue eyes and he was tricky. He could switch from being Jennifer's best friend to being her worst nightmare mid-sentence. Unpredictable and terrifying, he paralysed Jennifer. Naming him after the Norse God of mischief and evil was her secret insult.

*

They had taken her during her birthday celebrations. She had been tipsy and happy, looking for the loo in The Ship Inn in Saltburn. Loki, like a handsome doorman in a dinner jacket, said that this toilet was out of order and she should go through the door he pointed to and use the

other one.

Jennifer was proud that even tipsy she'd realized that 'out of order' didn't mean it was in the wrong place, but that it really meant 'broken'. She remembered opening the door and wondering hazily which way across the car park she should go when someone's gloved hand came from behind covering her mouth. Fear and a horrible chemical smell made her vomit onto her assailant's arm. A curse and something cracked the back of her head.

Jennifer lapsed in and out of consciousness while being bundled into the back of a car then driven hard and fast for what seemed hours.

She finally woke tied to a wooden chair in a windowless brick walled room. The air was thick and damp and smelled of dead things. Her head pounded. Buttocks, shoulders, arms and wrists ached. Loki stood over her. He had changed from his dinner jacket into a checked shirt and jeans and held an electric shaver. The type used by professional barbers.

'How are you feeling, pretty one?' he asked.

Jennifer started to protest; indignation and anger making her spit abuse at him, demanding he let her go. A back-hand across her face rocked her brain and turned her anger to terror. She lost control of her bladder. Hot urine ran down her legs, pooling around the chair.

'You filthy bitch.' Loki switched on the shaver. He clamped her neck with his free arm then forced the shaver across Jennifer's skull. Again and again.

Half way through the ordeal, Loki stood back to admire his handiwork, brushing clumps of hair from his

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forearm. Blood ran down Jennifer's forehead from the multiple cuts and scrapes, dripped onto her flushed cheeks and mixed with her tears.

'Very pretty,' Loki said, smiling with satisfaction. 'Crying makes you look much younger, you know. Puffs your lips up. Very sexy.' A splashing noise made him look down and he realised he was treading in Jennifer's urine. 'My fucking shoes!'

Jennifer sobbed.

'Filthy bitch.' Loki wrapped his arm round Jennifer's neck once more. He dragged and scraped at her skull with the shaver until all her hair lay in blood and urine-clotted clumps around them.

Loki stood back, slightly breathless, and looked at the buzzing instrument. 'Pretty good thing this shaver. I wonder what else it can cut through.'

He walked round behind Jennifer. She strained to see where he was going, what he was doing. Wet eyes wide with fear.

She felt vibrations against her hands. Loki used the shaver to cut the rope that painfully bound her wrists together. Jennifer was free and tried to stand but Loki had grabbed the collar of her blouse. He yanked her hard down into her seat. She thought he just wanted her to stay seated but he did not stop pulling down and back. Her favourite blouse resisted briefly then ripped and gave.

'Please, no,' she pleaded. 'Please don't hurt me any more. Please, I beg you.' But Loki grabbed at her dress, at her bra, at any clothing he could get hold of and ripped it off her body. Jennifer fell from the chair onto the floor

crying and pleading as Loki grabbed and pulled; tearing manically at her clothes, grabbing and pulling so hard her body sometimes left the ground. Like a bird of prey tearing the skin and flesh from its unfortunate meal.

He didn't stop until he was sated, until she was naked.

Jennifer lay in the foetal position. A large, gangly baby covered in blood and urine and snot and tears. 'Please,' she begged, 'please don't. Please.'

Loki stood over her, sneering at his handiwork, getting his breath back. He noticed a small red rose high on her right shoulder blade. 'Hey,' he said, 'nice tattoo.' He prodded her with his toe. 'Put the gown on.' He unplugged the shaver and left.

Jennifer heard the door being locked. She lifted her head cautiously. The only other things in the room, apart from the chair, were a hospital gown folded neatly in one corner, and a chrome bedpan.

Jennifer crawled to the hospital gown; used the outside of it to wipe the worst of the mess off herself before putting it on, struggling to tie the cloth straps as tight as she could behind her.

She put the chair back on its feet then sat on it. Her head shaking, her mind numb with fear, Jennifer counted bricks. Counted her breaths. Counted as many bruises on her arms and legs as she could see. Just counted.

After a while, Jennifer stood and walked slowly around to ease the ache in her buttocks. Counted the bricks. Counted her breaths. Counted her steps.

The noise of the lock startled her.

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A big man dressed in black appeared at the door. Fear turned Jennifer into an automaton as he made her sit. He stood in front of her, legs apart and arms behind his back. Loki stood at the door. The big man in black grinned at her showing a gold tooth and she immediately christened him Heimdall after the Norse God. Loki's long time golden-toothed enemy.

'We're going to ask you to do us a little favour,' he said. He put two fingers on her swollen lips when she tried to speak. 'We don't want to hurt you but your co-operation is vital to us.' He produced a handheld computer from his pocket, turned the screen towards Jennifer. It played a short film of Loki asking Jennifer's mother for directions. Jennifer had to clamp her hands over her mouth to stop herself from screaming. The meaning was clear. Do anything stupid and your mother dies - as well.

They left Jennifer alone. What do they want? What will they do to get it? Will they torture me for information I don't know I have? Then torture me some more to make sure I'm telling the truth?

Time passed. Ten minutes. An hour. Jennifer couldn't tell. The fear was timeless.

A noise at the door threatened to still her heart. Loki, fluffy haired and terrifying, stood by the open door and motioned for her to leave. She was guided along brick corridors to a green door and into a white tiled room with toilets, sinks, a shower.

Loki threw a towel and a clean gown at her. 'Knock yourself out,' he said. Then left locking the door

behind him.

The shock of her face in the mirror.

Knock yourself out, he'd said. Bash her head against the wall?

That's when Jennifer started thinking about suicide. Whatever Heimdall and Loki wanted it wasn't good. And when they had what they wanted, then what?

Ten minutes later Jennifer was taken upstairs to a room with boarded up windows, an easy chair, a bed, en suite, and a desk with a computer.

'You take it easy and relax,' Loki said, in the kindly voice of a concerned relative. Then his tone changed, became sinister. 'I'll be watching.' He smiled, pointed to a camera high in the corner of the room and turned to leave. 'Oh,' he said turning back with a new jocular air, 'don't touch the computer or I'll kill you. Okay?'

More time passed. Jennifer was given a cheese sandwich, a plastic cup of water, some Good Housekeeping magazines. She laid on the bed, pulled the sheet over herself and slept. She awoke with Loki looking down at her.

'Hello pretty one.' He leaned down and stroked her sore stubbly head. 'Soon you will do us a great service. Do not mess it up, okay?' He pulled back the sheet and let his gaze move slowly along her bare legs. With his free hand he grabbed the front of his trousers, as if weighing his genitals, and said, 'Or I will mess you up good, my pretty. Okay?'

His sneer stayed long after he and his mouth had left.

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Jennifer thought again about killing herself. But she knew she did not have the nerve and they would probably take revenge on her mother anyway. Not an option.

The silence was broken by something heavy being dragged past her room. She fought the impulse to go to the door and press her ear against it. The camera would see her and they might get annoyed.

Her heart missed a beat as she heard the lock turn once more.

The big man in black, Heimdall, stepped into the room carrying a large bound manuscript. He dropped it on the desk next to the computer.

'You will need to refresh your memory,' he said, his voice like cold steel. 'Study hard.'

When Heimdall had left, Jennifer approached the desk. She recognised the logo on the cover. Title: PDMX MAC Codes. Sub-title: INT CNC BANK 7909 R PEERSON.

She held the familiar document in her hands. The smell of it bringing back memories.

Oh, my God.

Chapter 3

Roger woke to find himself tied to a wooden chair in a windowless brick walled room. The air was thick and damp, and smelled of rotten vegetables.

'Hey. Welcome back, killer.' Lenny stood over him smoking. 'How do you feel?'

Roger shook his head. It hurt. He pulled at the ropes binding his wrists.

'Sorry about that,' said Lenny, 'but I want to make sure you've calmed the fuck down.' He dropped his cigarette, crushed it under his heel.

'I am calm. I am perfectly calm.' Roger struggled against his bonds. 'What the hell's going on? Let me go! Untie me now!' Roger's struggles caused him to rock dangerously on the chair.

'Whoa boy,' said Lenny steadying Roger's shoulder. 'You be calm, now. I'll let you free when you settle down. Okay?!'

Roger struggled more almost tipping over. 'Let me go!' he shouted. Lenny back-handed Roger across the face.

There was that strange brain rattle again. Roger felt a sudden surge of fear and tried not to be sick. Roger B

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observed that this was a brand new experience. He'd never been tied to a chair before. A bit like the movies. Only it hurt. What you didn't get from the films was the way your shoulder blades sort of scrunched together and the inside of your biceps dug into the top of the chair; the way your arse got sore because it was hard to shuffle around and how your fingers got pins and needles through lack of blood.

Lenny shook his hand. 'Fuck!' he complained. 'That fucking hurt!'

'Oh, I'm sorry. Did my face hurt your hand?'

Lenny raised a fist to strike down at Roger.

This was really going to hurt. Roger turned away, closed his eyes, held his breath.

'That will be enough of that!' a stern male voice filled the room. Roger opened his eyes. Lenny lowered his fist and took a step back to reveal a large man dressed completely in black. Roger breathed again and thought this new man looked like some cliché secret agent. Roger B wondered if dandruff was ever an issue.

'Just trying to get the prisoner into a fit state of mind, sergeant,' said Lenny.

Sergeant? Prisoner?!

'Thank you, Mr Ludhoe,' said the newcomer moving behind Roger, 'But Mr Peerson is hardly a prisoner.' Roger felt the man's breath on the back of his ears and the rope around his wrists loosen.

'He was very fucking agitated, sergeant,' warned Lenny.

'Mr Peerson is our guest, Ludhoe.' The tone was of

someone not used to disagreement or disrespect of any kind. 'Stand down and keep quiet. I'll deal with you later.' Lenny stood back against the wall.

Roger felt a firm hand under his arm helping him stand.

'Please forgive our ... inhospitality, Mr Peerson. May I call you Roger?'

The confusing tumble-drier had started up in Roger's mind again. 'Sergeant?' he managed.

'That's more a ... nickname, really. Meadhill, John Meadhill.' He held out his hand which Roger shook automatically. 'Sergeant, to my friends.'

'Hello, Sergeant,' said Roger. That sounded weak and Roger B said so.

'Please ...' Meadhill motioned for Roger to follow him and led the way along brick lined corridors, up a flight of stairs, into a well appointed hallway. Soft carpet, fancy coving on the ceiling. They passed a study; leather chairs, leather-topped desk, bookshelves; on to a plush living room with two sofas arranged facing each other across an enormous coffee table. Roger moved to a bay window which allowed magnificent views of the Humber estuary.

'Hardly the arsehole of Britain,' said Roger turning around.

Meadhill looked slightly nonplussed. 'No,' he said, pausing. 'The ... amenities are just through here,' he continued. 'Please feel free to ... tidy yourself up.'

Roger caught sight of himself in a gilt-edged mirror hung over a fireplace. Grim. Car crash grim.

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'Thanks. I think I ...' Roger didn't look good. He noticed Meadhill's reflection in the mirror: Meadhill smiled showing a gold tooth. A different shade of gold to the gold edging the mirror.

'I think I will,' said Roger.

In the immaculate bathroom, Roger washed his hands and face. He toyed with the idea of stripping off his shirt for an underarm wash. Thought better of it but felt guilty about leaving blood-stains on Meadhill's towels. Guilt-edged towels.

What the hell was happening? Roger wondered what Julia was telling Harry at that moment. What was the answer to the question, 'Where's Daddy?' Guilt-edged. And why does Julia keep coming into my mind? Harry's round innocent face with bright grey eyes and spiky blond hair was very clear but Julia? Flowing dark hair? Too much makeup? She wasn't clear. Her face wasn't clear.

A startling knock at the door.

'You all right in there, Roger?'

'Yes, coming. Just ... coming.'

Meadhill sat on one sofa, legs to one side, avoiding the coffee table now laden with sandwiches, fairy-cakes, sugar bowls and assorted paraphernalia associated with afternoon tea. 'Sit down,' he said. 'Help yourself.'

Roger sat on the opposite sofa. Interesting times: death and fairy-cakes.

'Where's Lenny?' he asked leaning towards the salmon and cucumber sandwiches.

'Lenny's been telling me ... all about you,' said

Meadhill ignoring Roger's question.

Roger froze.

'Lenny tells me you worked for the MOD.'

'I did?' Ministry of Defence? There were memories there somewhere. Roger's hunger won. 'And, um, how does he know that?' he said to move things along so he could take a salmon and cucumber sandwich.

'You're quite famous in certain ... circles, you know Roger.'

'I am?' The sandwich was delicious. Should he be enjoying this quite so much? It was all Roger could do to stop himself stuffing the hole thing in his mouth at once.

Meadhill picked up a piece of paper from the coffee table. 'What's the cube root of two five six zero four seven point eight seven five?' he asked suddenly.

Sixty-three point five, said Roger C. It felt, to Roger, as unremarkable as chewing. And it was right. Roger knew it was right. 'Really couldn't tell you,' he said.

Meadhill looked at Roger for what seemed an age.

'Sixty-three point five,' said Roger eventually through mouthfuls of another sandwich. He swallowed.

'You seem to be exceptionally well informed,' said Roger. This wasn't good. This didn't feel right. This man knew more about him than he did.

Meadhill smiled, flashing his gold tooth. 'Like I said; you're famous.' Meadhill studied Roger. Still smiling. Still showing gold. Gilt.

Roger wondered what Meadhill meant. Famous? Was he just trying to flatter him? Did he think Roger

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knew he was well known?

'Let's try another,' Meadhill said at last. 'You don't mind, do you?' It wasn't a question. Meadhill read from his crib sheet, 'What's nine eight seven six five four three two one divided by one five seven?'

Six two nine zero seven nine one point eight five four, said Roger C instantly. Come on, give us a hard one. Roger repeated the number out loud wondering where this was leading.

'That's ... remarkable,' said Meadhill visibly impressed. 'Look at this,' he said passing another piece of paper from the coffee table to Roger.

Roger looked and saw a mass of numbers, hieroglyphics, symbols of all kinds. It's a speech, said Roger C.

In a dead pan voice Roger said, *'Before I come to describe the Agreement which was signed at Munich in the small hours of Friday morning last, I would like to remind the House of two things which I think it very essential not to forget when those terms are being considered ... It's Neville Chamberlain isn't it? You want me to go on?'*

Meadhill slapped his thigh with delight. 'How the hell do you do that? It's just ... gibberish when I look at it.'

'There's a little voice in my head,' said Roger smiling. It was clever, wasn't it. 'You should see me rattle off a fiendish Su Doku.'

'Well however the hell you do it, that is ... amazing.' Meadhill sat back and studied Roger again.

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Roger ate. Poured himself some tea. Tried to adopt the expression of someone not thinking. Didn't think about Harry. Didn't think about the dead mock-blonde.

'Roger,' began Meadhill, 'I ... we could really use someone like you in our ... association.'

He was being recruited. Roger shook his head. 'I don't think it would be a very good idea,' said Roger. 'I'm not sure I could be very useful to you right now. My life is ... in a bit of turmoil at the moment. Lenny must have told you about ...'

Meadhill nodded. 'The accident,' he said. 'I understand but just ... hear me out for a few minutes. Okay?'

Roger shrugged. What was the expression? It's his dime. They're his fairy-cakes.

'I understand you've had one or two ... over the years ... one or two ... psychological issues?'

'You have my MOD files?' asked Roger. Where did that come from? Memories that seemed to have been there all the time. 'They're supposed to be confidential. Who are you really?' This was tricky. Roger's mind was offering up memories in real time. Having new memories that you knew were new, but the very fact it was a memory made it odd you could remember a time when the memory was not there. And talking at the same time! Forming sentences based on memories that were only just arriving. Like walking across a bridge that was building itself, extending, with every step. It wasn't there until you stepped on it.

Meadhill brought relief, in the form of something

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else to consider, to Roger's tumbling mind by saying, 'The ... association, has access to all kinds of information at every level. We have teams dedicated to ... putting two and two together. And when Mr Ludhoe, Lenny, filed his report about you ... well, all kinds of alarm bells rang.'

'Alarm bells?' Roger sat back on the sofa. Deliberately casual. The sofa was extremely comfortable. Quilt-edged guilt.

'Alarms in the ... good sense.'

Roger looked puzzled. Was the misuse of simple words Meadhill's way of showing stress? What do poker players call it? A tell.

'Are you a philosophical fellow at all?' asked Meadhill quickly.

'I'm ... I'm not sure I follow you.'

'You've heard of ... Schrödinger's cat?'

'Of course.' Roger was happy to regurgitate a memory. It was getting easier. 'Schrödinger's cat is in a box in a dual state of being simultaneously alive and dead until the box is opened and an observer sees if a random killing mechanism has done its job. Or not.'

'Precisely. And the Zen question: does a tree which falls in the forest where no one can hear it, make a noise?'

'Is it a Zen or Buddhist question?' asked Roger his interest returning to the sandwiches. 'And, do you mind if I ...'

'No,' Meadhill gestured at the table, 'please, help yourself.'

Meadhill sat back. 'I'd like to tell you more about our ... association and about how you may be able to ...

help us and how we could help you.'

'I don't know ... I'm not really ...' Roger wanted to eat. 'If you don't mind me eating and listening at the same time?'

Meadhill spread his hands. 'I couldn't ask for more,' he said. 'The association I represent is called ... The KOPALDA.'

Roger felt uneasy. He knew a confidence was being shared, but his discretion had not been requested. He had to speak.

'I'm assuming everything you're about to tell me is to remain between these four walls?' interrupted Roger. 'I could sign an NDA? A Non Disclosure Agreement?'

Meadhill smiled, flashing his gold tooth, brushed imaginary dust from his trousers. 'The KOPALDA, as an organisation, has one ... fundamental belief. From that belief all else ... springs. What do you think happens to your mind when you die?'

The question caught Roger unawares. Was this to be one of those conversations he'd had at college? The meaning of life, death, religion?

'I tend to lean towards the, rather pessimistic, view that, when the brain dies the mind dies with it,' said Roger.

'So, on your death,' Meadhill steepled his fingers, 'it all just stops. Nothing. The end.'

'Yes,' confirmed Roger nodding.

'That's The KOPALDA's view too,' said Meadhill looking rather pleased. 'From this basic belief emerges a whole, logical philosophy. A philosophy by which we

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can live our ... insignificant lives.'

Because Meadhill paused, Roger nodded again.

Meadhill continued, 'With no heaven or hell, no good or bad, no right or wrong, there are zero personal consequences to any of our actions other than those ... meted out on us before we die. The KOPALDA was created by those who recognised; the futility of religion; the huge waste of time by the mass of humanity on traditional moral and ethical issues; and that the one single thing every human being on the planet should be striving for is, quite simply, pleasure.'

'I'm convinced,' said Roger, 'where do I sign?'

Meadhill's steady gaze made Roger regret his tone.

'Seriously,' said Roger trying to make amends, 'it all sounds rather simplistic. No consequences. So feel free to do anything without regard for anyone else.'

'Not quite,' said Meadhill, 'The Founders of The KOPALDA recognised that none of us live ... in isolation.'

'No man is an island?' offered Roger.

'Each of us needs the assistance and co-operation of others to get through this life. The Founders also recognised that the vast majority of humanity is weak and stupid and needs religions of one kind or another. Like a ham actor needs his audience, the weak mind needs its religion. So The Founders created The KOPALDA. In essence, an association of like-minded individuals. An association with ... rules. Rules dedicated to the protection of its members and exploitation of everything else.'

'I'm sure it's all ...' Roger struggled for words, 'very nice for you and the other members of your KOPALDA, but, from where I'm sat it just sounds like another cult or something inspired by the Da Vinci Code - if you don't mind me saying so.'

'I don't mind at all which is why I mentioned Schrödinger's cat and the falling tree earlier. The KOPALDA has an answer to these two ... questions.'

'Really?' despite himself, Roger was interested.

'Yes. The answers are: the cat is either alive or dead, not in some strange potential state. And, yes. The tree does make a noise.'

'How do you come to those conclusions from the basis that the mind comes to an end at death?' asked Roger. Easy, said Roger C. 'Oh, I see,' said Roger.

'You do?' asked Meadhill looking puzzled.

'Yes, I think so. Does your argument run along the lines of: the mind dies so there is no observer for the private thoughts and feelings that mind had? With no observer, the mind should not have existed. But clearly it does. So an observer is not necessary for things, events, anything to happen. This means that observer-less phenomena will, more than likely, follow the same rules as observed phenomena. That is, the cat will have either died or not and the tree will fall with a splendid crash.'

'Very good,' said Meadhill. 'When I was told about you I must admit I was sceptical. But ...'

Roger felt uncomfortable again. This time, like a mouse being eyed by a big black cat.

Meadhill stood. 'You must be tired,' he said. 'Let

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me show you to your room. Shower, rest. There is a change of clothes which will fit. This evening you will meet The Captain for dinner.'

There was no argument from Roger.

*

Roger lay on the bed. The pain behind his sternum came back when he thought about Harry. It seemed like months ago but it was just the other day. Wasn't it?

That girl who had been shot: it was that ... ape's fault. Not his.

Roger tried to put Harry and the shooting from his mind.

She was dead. That silly girl with the short skirt and stupid front-only hairstyle. Gone. No pain. No memories. And everything ended in memories didn't it? If there were no memories then it was as good as if it had never happened. Like an operation. You didn't remember the surgeon's knife slicing through your flesh, did you. No memories. No pain. Nothing. So it didn't matter how you died. No matter how much suffering there was during a life, it didn't matter. Because it would not be remembered and so not have happened. Another consciousness would pop along with another newborn baby. Minds come and go. Might as well be the same minds. Maybe they are the same minds. Maybe we're all one big mind. Baby's minds. Which mind gets which baby? Before they're allotted perhaps they're interchangeable.

Roger had the uneasy memory of a forgotten epiphany. An epiphany where a clear argument could be

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made for saying that all people are the same person. It was chance that created your physical brain. The mind grows from a chance brain. Therefore they're all the same potential mind.

The girl no longer existed. He could have done anything to her. Tortured her. Raped her. Made her do anything he felt like. And she would not have remembered. So it would not have mattered.

He could do anything to anyone. There were no repercussions and the victims; dogs, cats, people; they all died eventually. As good as if it had not happened.

He could do anything.

Roger felt something release his chest. Harry would be dead one day. Harry's mind would no longer exist. No memories.

Roger could do anything he bloody-well liked.

But if everyone felt that way it would be chaos. The world would cease to exist in its present form. Anarchy.

But of course.

Rules.

You needed rules.

Co-operation and rules.

A knock at the door startled Roger.

Dinner was ready.

Chapter 4

Loki somehow unlocked the door, turned the handle and stepped into the room in one, loud move, startling Jennifer into gasping with surprise.

'Miss me?' he asked, grinning at his success in making Jennifer jump like a startled dik-dik.

Jennifer sat on the bed, hugging her knees. The fluffy headed monster was back. The opened manual slipped to the floor with a thud making her jump again.

'Aw, come on,' he pleaded like a repentant lover, 'I bought you a present while I was away.' He stepped back through the door, returning with something covered in plastic on a hanger. A dress?

'You,' he said, 'are having dinner with The Captain, this evening. And this,' Loki ripped off the plastic cover in one smooth motion, 'is how you're going to impress the arse off him.' He held up a black dress triumphantly.

Jennifer looked away so he placed the black dress across the back of a chair and took a step towards her.

'You smell,' he sneered then turned and went back out through the door returning with a small grey plastic vanity case. He approached Jennifer, held the vanity case by its strap on one, long index finger. 'Some ladies' crap

in here,' he said, dropping the case onto the bed.

'Why would they do that?' Jennifer regretted the question instantly.

Loki narrowed his eyes at her and used a scary, back-of-the-throat voice, 'Be ready in one hour or I'll drag you there by your hair. Oh, I forgot, you don't have hair. Just be ready. Okay?'

Jennifer fought down the urge to sob. Loki bent towards her.

'Okay!?' he bellowed.

Jennifer covered her head with her hands, 'Yes, yes,' she whimpered.

Her eyes closed, she heard Loki snigger, shut the door then whistling, fade away.

She looked at the door. 'Not nice,' she whispered.

The vanity case was filled with shampoos, makeup, perfumes, combs, brushes, a full array of toiletries for the discerning lady.

Dinner with The Captain? She wasn't on a boat, was she? No. She could hear the faint rumble of traffic.

She remembered the manual that had slipped to the floor. Lifted it back onto the bed. Reading the Machine Access Codes, the compression algorithms, the cipher matrixes; had been like listening to an old friend. The memories. The tunnels under Admiralty Arch in London. The smell of damp brickwork and cement. The underground rooms. Rooms abandoned after World War Two. Tables with dusty notepads opened to pencilled scrawl. Some rooms held evidence of their former residents. Blurred circles pushed into the old carpets by

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six-wheeled chairs. Wheeled chairs that had been turned and shuffled by their occupiers for months. Maybe even years. They'd refurbished some of the rooms. Exchanged the smell of the past for the smell of now. Rubber, cleaning fluid, sweat. Some said the ghost of Churchill roamed those tunnels. Some would swear they smelled whisky, cigar smoke, felt an impossible chill. It was Jennifer's happiest time. Let loose with algorithms, patterns, polynomials. The guardians of secrets. The pictures were gorgeous. Data, information, fragmented and split into divine structures dancing chaotically, reforming and swirling through wires and computers, electronic buffers, making Jennifer laugh out loud. Pictures to music. Music to pictures.

They wanted those secrets. Loki and Heimdall. Maybe they would let her go if she told them. Maybe they would not.

Control the fear. Deep breaths. Small steps.

Jennifer showered and changed and preened and at last looked at herself. Jennifer Penrose, you look like one of those cocktail party hostesses on the TV adverts. More coffee? Another mint? Shame about the scabby head!

The fear had gone. What could they do to her she hadn't already imagined doing to herself? The fear came back. Oh, yes. That.

*

Loki acted the perfect gentleman and escorted Jennifer up stairs to a room with a long, well-polished dining table. Other guests stood around, talking. She kept her gaze low. Sat down. White, silver, glittering glass. Someone

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was ringing a crystal bell. A bell fairies would sound to welcome their queen. People sat around her. Napkins were unfurled, flapped and placed on knees. Glasses were being filled. Mumbled conversations. God, I hope no one talks to me. What will I say? No one's looking at me.

Jennifer drank some white wine and hoped her trembling hand wouldn't draw anyone's attention. The glass wobbled against her lip and stung the healing cuts.

Soup. Fish. Lamb. Crème Brule. Trembling hands. Murmuring conversation all around. No one looked at her.

A presentation? A fake. A strange fake parchment and an impossible story.

It was finished. Back to the room. Safe in prison.

That went well.

Apart from that fake parchment that is.

What was all that about?

Chapter 5

The size of the gathering surprised Roger. He'd expected just Meadhill and the mysterious Captain. But there were, perhaps, twelve or so people gathered in small groups around a dinning table which would not have looked out of place at a Queen's banquet.

Through a window which ran the full length of the room, Roger saw it was darkening outside and lights shone on the other side of the river. This was Roger's favourite type of view: lights shining from buildings black against a light blue sky. Long shimmering reflections. Small clues of people. Birds. Here and there a boat. The lights, the dim buildings and bright sky reminded Roger of the Rene Magritte painting, *Empire of Light*. A daytime sky over a night-time building. Comfortable oddness.

The view, the smell of good food, the murmured conversations, they were all colluding to make Roger feel even more tired. A hand holding an extra-long match appeared beside him to light a number of candles on the window sill. Following the white clad arm as it continued its task Roger turned from the view then looked back into the room which had momentarily been excluded from his

consciousness.

Meadhill and another man stood on the opposite side of the table, heads bent, deep in conversation. Each man had an almost identical blonde girl clinging to his arm. Each girl stood back slightly from her partner making it clear that, though she clearly belonged with this man, she was giving him space and privacy for his conversation. The girls were exquisite though, with perhaps a little too much makeup. Soft flowing blonde curls, great figures, no, sensational figures. Roger, for the first time in days, was aware he had a penis that wasn't just for peeing through.

Roger surmised that the man with Meadhill was The Captain. No one else in the room demanded attention in the same way. Middle-aged, grey hair, grey beard, plump. Nothing special to look at really. But there was something about his bearing. His clothes were perfect. The line of his arm as he held a glass. Just the right amount of white cuff on display. A hint of an expensive gold watch. Roger recognised someone he could never be. If you could bottle that ...

And suddenly the man looked straight at Roger. Dark brown eyes that looked like all pupil from across the table. Eyes that saw Roger for who he was. No hint of a smile or recognition. The man turned back to Meadhill, concentrating on what he was saying. Then he looked at Roger again. Taking in whatever Meadhill told him. The dark eyes swallowed his image. Roger felt a flush rising. I'm an exhibit. An object to be discussed free from the encumbrance of empathy with the object. An object with

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no thoughts, feelings, input, mind.

There has to be a better word for this feeling than 'uncomfortable', thought Roger.

One of the white coated waiters who had been lighting candles stood by The Captain and rang a small crystal bell.

The other guests knew where to sit. Meadhill gestured to Roger to sit at the place on his right. At the head of the table sat The Captain. To his right sat Meadhill. To Meadhill's right sat Roger. To The Captain's left sat an attractive middle-aged lady in a low cut black dress. Excellent cleavage, thought Roger nodding and smiling to her. To her left sat another attractive middle-aged lady in a low cut white dress. Another excellent cleavage, thought Roger nodding and smiling to her. Result. Ms Black and Ms White both smiled back.

To Roger's right sat the young lady who had been clinging to Meadhill's arm. Roger self-consciously unfolded his napkin then placed it on his lap. He couldn't help but notice that her skirt had risen revealing the lacy black top of her stockings. Don't stare. Look away. Perhaps one quick look. Excellent.

She was looking at him.

Shit!

She smiled. Roger's senses were filled with her sexuality.

'Hi,' she said through perfect teeth, pink lips and a hint of moist tongue.

Roger opened his mouth, breath came out but no sound. He coughed.

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'Hi,' he managed. Very smooth, thought Roger B. Shut up.

The pea and ham soup arrived.

Meadhill spoke quietly with The Captain. The two ladies across from Roger chatted to each other. The gorgeous creature to Roger's right made conversation with whoever was sat to her right. The other guests produced spasmodic mumblings and the odd laugh.

Very subdued. Very polite. No one addressed Roger. The occasional eye contact with the Ms Black and Ms White opposite. Avoid looking at those excellent cleavages.

The soup bowl was removed.

The stocking-tops to Roger's right drew him like they'd thrown grappling irons in his face, pulling him to look down.

The white wine was superb. Fresh. Vibrant.

A small piece of white fish arrived. Delicious. Crunchy cheese on top. Scrumptious.

'Mr Peerson.'

Roger wasn't sure if he had heard or imagined his name being spoken. He looked up. The table had fallen silent. He was being studied with interest by Ms Black and Ms White from across the table.

'Mr Peerson?' It was The Captain.

'Yes?' Roger put down his knife and fork and dabbed his mouth with his napkin in, what he hoped, was not as self-conscious and effete as it felt.

'In no way do I intend any disrespect here, but,' The Captain took a sip of his wine, 'would it be possible,

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and please feel free to say no, would it be possible to ask you one or two questions targeted at your particular ... talent?'

Roger looked round uncertainly. Bring it on, said Roger C. 'Now?' he asked.

'What is the square root of, say, one thousand and thirty-nine?' said The Captain.

'Thirty-two point two three three five two two nine two,' said Roger, relaying Roger C's answer.

A small, Mexican gasp went round the tale.

'Remarkable,' said The Captain.

'I could be making it up, of course,' said Roger.

'He's not making it up.' Ms White, directly opposite Roger, held up a calculator confirming the number.

The Captain raised his arm and snapped his fingers. The waiters sprang into action and extinguished all candles. A picture on the far wall facing The Captain was taken down revealing a blank white surface. Curtains glided together across the window shutting out the view. A ceiling projector clicked into life throwing a stark bright picture on the wall. Guests partially blocking the image moved their chairs. The shuffling stopped. Silence. Everyone looked at Roger.

The image was of a very old piece of parchment. A modern 6 inch ruler placed next to it sized it at about the same size as a piece of A4 paper. At first glance, it looked like an extract from a very old bible. A beautifully painted picture of a monk-like figure leaning on a long staff and holding up his right hand in blessing was clearly visible at the top left of the page. What followed,

covering practically the whole of the page, was a script of some kind. It was divided into horizontal lines but the characters were very strange. Like Chinese characters built from Egyptian hieroglyphics instead of lines.

Roger felt numerous pairs of eyes on him. Concentrate on the picture. The lines swam and dissolved and suddenly there was that familiar feeling.

Roger began to read as if in a trance, 'Knights, alchemists, join great Paracelsus on the one affirming quest. Come kneel before our General in this cryptic right of passage. Knights Of Paracelsus And Latter-Day Alchemists bring redemption to the ignorant mass.'

Roger stopped, squinted at the image.

'Well that's what it appears to say,' said Roger, 'though I've no idea what it means.'

The Captain clicked his fingers. Like time reversed the room assumed its previous state.

While chairs were being shuffled, Jennifer's familiar voice whispered at the back of Roger's head. 'It's a fake,' she hissed. 'It's using a code developed during World War Two and it's decoding directly into English.'

Roger wondered for a moment if he had dozed off and was dreaming.

There was a pause while The Captain studied Roger. Then The Captain stood, pushed back his chair and started to clap. Everyone around the table did likewise. Roger sat stunned as the applause washed over him. People before had said, 'Wow, how do you do that?' 'That's amazing.' 'Do something else.' But this, this was different. This was real appreciation. Recognition for

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what was, after all, an amazing talent. This was what he deserved. The fake parchment had been a test. Hadn't it?

The rest of the meal was pleasantly intense. Discussing his 'gift', Roger's weariness fell away. Forgetting Julia for a while, Roger almost convinced himself he'd never discussed it so openly before. But more thoughts were crowding in which he tried to push away. They were leading to Harry, and there were problems with his gift. Problems that Julia had helped him with. Problems to do with patterns. Patterns everywhere. Julia had helped Roger keep the patterns out of his way. Roger C had the shield. The key.

'It really is a voice in my head, you know,' he'd insisted. But everyone had laughed. So he had laughed with them. When the questions fell away about his computational and cryptographic talents it was Roger's turn. He elected to avoid the word 'fake' for now. What was the message on the parchment about? He had worked out The KOPALDA was an acronym of Knights Of Paracelsus And Latter-Day Alchemists, but who was Paracelsus?

Ms White from across the table eagerly brought Roger up to speed: It turned out that Paracelsus was an outspoken 16th century Swiss alchemist, healer and philosopher. His public face and writings were abrasive and extreme for his time and made him many enemies. He committed his most secret and irreligious thoughts to an encrypted manuscript and founded his Special Association, der Zweckverband, later to become The KOPALDA. The page which Roger had translated 'on the

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hoof' was an extract from the beginning of part of Paracelsus' secret manuscript. A manuscript which had taken 15 man years to translate. Roger could have done it in a day or two.

Ms White's earnest summary left Roger feeling uneasy. They all seemed taken in by this fake parchment. Perhaps they didn't know? Perhaps he was being tested.

At the end of the meal Roger was introduced to an MP, a Police Chief, a local Councillor and some men and women of undefined professions. The stocking-top girl was suddenly everywhere. She hung feather-light on his arm. Light as a feather her name was Heather.

You lucky dog, said Roger B. Roger C was more cautious; remember what happened last time? Roger could not.

*

People fell away from the dining room. New, nameless friends said goodbye, shook hands, kissed the air. Heather left a lingering kiss on Roger's cheek with a promise of more. He ached for her. You lucky dog.

At last, it was just Roger, Meadhill and The Captain sat at the head of the empty table. Empty except for some Port and cigars. Roger accepted the port and, fighting the urge to conform, declined a cigar.

There was that feeling again. Roger remembered going on a coach trip to the beach with his mother. It was a fantastic day. Sunshine, sandcastles, hotdogs, pop, games. The trip back was filled with laughter and silly songs. Roger prayed it would never end and the coach trip home would last forever.

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That feeling was back. Roger was crammed with good food and tingling with his success and popularity.

'You look content,' said The Captain.

'Me?' said Roger. 'Very content. Thank you. Thank you so much for your hospitality.'

'I take it then that you approve?'

'Approve?'

'Of our little KOPALDA?'

'It's ... most agreeable,' said Roger.

The Captain leaned forward. 'I'll get to the point,' he said. 'The KOPALDA can use you and in return you can have virtually anything you wish. For the time being, this house is yours.'

Meadhill smiled gently, nodding slowly in agreement.

'Just one thing,' said Roger. 'I'm sorry, but it's been bothering me since the ... slide show.'

'Go on,' said The Captain.

'This whole KOPALDA thing, I don't know about the Paracelsus story but,' Roger took a deep breath, 'the parchment is definitely fake so, what's that all about?'

The Captain narrowed his eyes at Roger. 'Why do you say it's fake?' he said.

'The encryption model; it's too modern.'

Meadhill and The Captain exchanged glances.

'And it's simply encoded English. It doesn't decode to Swiss or German or whatever language this Paracelsus character would have spoken. Just English.'

The Captain leaned forwards. 'You haven't disappointed me,' he said. 'It's – I'm almost too

embarrassed to say it to a man of your obvious intelligence – it's a marketing ploy. Attracting good staff, committed staff, is very difficult. There are a lot of competing organisations in this line of business these days. We hired some experts and they came up with this ... story. And the name? It's rooted in a smidgeon of truth, apparently. Paracelsus existed. So, according to our PR men, this gives the organisation gravitas, a banner to follow, a philosophy. And ...' the Captain leaned back in his chair, '... it works. The quality of our new recruits has never been better.'

There was silence as Roger absorbed this extraordinary, almost comical, information. He wondered if the organisation had an Investors In People logo on its letterhead.

'Regardless of all that,' said Meadhill. 'The basic philosophy was and is in place. The offer stands.'

'Just say the word,' The Captain stood and held out his hand, 'and you will be offered the full protection, resources and, dare I say, riches, of The KOPALDA in return for simply doing what comes naturally from time to time.'

Roger felt compelled to stand too. And the alternative? asked Roger C. Quiet!

Roger clasped The Captain's hand in what he hoped was a firm and manly grip. 'I'd be honoured, sir,' he said.

'Excellent,' said the Captain. 'Now to sleep, for tomorrow we play.'

Meadhill stood and clapped Roger on the back.

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'Welcome aboard,' he said.

*

It was a strange, familiar meeting. It had been a long time. Roger and Jennifer studied each other.

Roger was the first to speak.

'You look well.'

'I look terrible.'

Roger looked around the space. Jennifer stood looking at Roger.

Roger spoke again. 'I'm going to need your help.'

'I thought so.'

'Will you help me?'

'Do I have a choice?'

'We all have a choice.'

Jennifer hugged her arms.

'I'm going to have to do a job,' Roger said.

'I know.'

'It will most likely be illegal.'

'I know.'

'But it will be worth it.'

'For who?' Jennifer asked.

Roger couldn't hold Jennifer's gaze. He walked around the space.

Jennifer said, 'It was good to get the manual out again.'

Roger smiled. 'You always loved that stupid manual.'

'It's not the manual,' Jennifer said, 'it's the memories. The fun. The people. The work. And the manual isn't stupid. It's my ...'

GARY BAKER

'The work,' Roger said. 'Yes, you loved the work.'

'... what is the word?'

'Crutch?' Roger suggested. 'Tooth fairy? Bible?'

'Yes,' Jennifer said, 'I suppose it's all of those things.'

Roger stood in front of Jennifer. Held her gaze. 'So you'll help me?' he asked.

Jennifer smiled. 'What choice do I have?'

'I love you, Jennifer.'

'I love you too, Roger.'

'I'll be in touch,' Roger said.

'Give my love to Harry.'

'I will,' Roger promised. 'The instant I see him.'

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Chapter 6

Roger was woken by a persistent beeping from a small black plastic travel clock by his bedside. It glowed 7:30am. He slapped down, shutting the alarm off. Roger didn't remember setting it. Didn't remember the clock. Okay. Someone wants him awake and up.

Roger fumbled for the light switch. The photons hurt. A bit if a thick head. Too much port.

Twenty minutes later and Roger was showered and dressed in some plain dark clothes he'd found in the cupboards. He followed the smell of breakfast down to the dining room where all traces of the previous night had been cleared away. Meadhill, dressed in black, sat reading a newspaper, eating buttered toast.

Through the window, Roger could see the River Humber was busy. Gulls bobbed and weaved against a bright grey sky. No sound penetrated from the barges and tugs straining against the tide.

'Morning, hope you slept well.' Meadhill indicated a hotel style buffet along one wall of the dining room. 'Help yourself.'

A selection of breakfast food was on display complete with a waiter who took a plate and loaded it

with Roger's choices. Scrambled eggs, toast, a slice of bacon.

The waiter placed Roger's breakfast selection on the table opposite Meadhill. Interesting use of the phrase 'help yourself', thought Roger sitting down.

'Tea or coffee, sir?'

'Coffee, thank you.' Roger started cutting a bite sized piece of bacon, very aware that Meadhill was watching him. He took a self-conscious mouthful before realising he had neglected to unfold his napkin and place it on his lap. Meadhill's napkin lay used and crumpled to his left.

The meal continued in, as far as Roger was concerned, awkward silence, until his coffee was placed on the table in front of him.

'I understand you've had certain ... difficulties in the past,' said Meadhill, 'so please be assured we will do our utmost to make ... all aspects of your stay as stress free as humanly possible.'

'Clearly, you have access to my personal files,' said Roger with no hint of annoyance. Roger felt he could be candid and open. 'My, gift, for want of a better word, does come at a price, I'm afraid.'

'Yes, I understand,' said Meadhill.

'But, I suppose I should be grateful.'

Meadhill raised his eyebrows questioningly.

'You know what an autistic savant is,' said Roger. 'The savant's ability seems to come at the cost of the rest of his personality. He's almost incapable of surviving without help from others, yet a part of him has a most

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incredible gift. A talent for art, music or, like me mathematics. I'm very lucky, it seems.'

'You mentioned, a price,' asked Meadhill.

Roger smiled. 'I have, shall we call them, moments. Moments of confusion, depression, blank patches. Annoying, yes, but, thankfully, not too debilitating.'

'And the trigger is ... stress?' asked Meadhill.

'Can be,' said Roger. 'Stress, anxiety, tiredness. The usual.'

Meadhill nodded and returned to his toast. Roger carried on with his breakfast.

The quiet was such that, when he stopped chewing, Roger found he could hear the noise of the river traffic beyond the double-glazed window and, through the seat and floor, could feel the mighty diesel engines pushing laden vessels along the thick, sluggish, waterway.

When they had both finished, Meadhill stood, smiled showing his gold tooth, gestured toward the door. 'To work,' he said.

*

Meadhill and Roger sat in silence as they were driven a few miles through dour suburbs. Small patches of retail outlets broke up the monotonous housing. Clusters of optimistic entrepreneurs coalesced to open fish & chip shops, newsagents, Chinese takeaways, off licenses, betting shops. How can these people be bothered? What is it that gets them out of bed in the morning? The car slowed and Roger watched old people, sexless and bent, standing at bus stops. Young women, sexless and bent,

pushing prams. Crooked nails, stuck in banality, hammered bent by the mallet of hopeless responsibility.

The black Mercedes pulled into a small trading estate. A terrace of brick built, once blue, roller-shuttered units. Vacant. For Rent. Pine Stripping. For Rent. Sign Writing. For Rent. Filthy yellow skips spilled planks, springs, bedsteads, stained carpets and torn black plastic bags onto gouged and crumbling tarmac.

The car pulled up in front of the unremarkable roller-shutter door of an industrial unit sporting a faded sign for ABC Imports & Exports Limited. Roger was about to get out of the car when the door rolled upwards. The car drove in, the door rolled down behind them.

The unit fronted an entrance to a bigger space. The car moved forward into a warehouse of about 50 yards square. In the centre, set on the concrete floor was, what looked like, a huge packing case. Roger realised it was actually a room or set of rooms created from packing case material. The outline of a door faced him but he could see no windows.

Six men, dressed in dark clothes similar to his own, stood or ambled around. One of them escorted Meadhill and Roger to the door into the packing case room where they were signalled to pause. The escort and Meadhill stood patiently looking into space. Roger noticed they both had small ear-pieces with a thin pink wire running behind their ears and down under their collars.

The three stood for a slow count to ten before the escort opened the door indicating they should both go

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through.

Inside was laid out like a classroom. Twenty or so desks faced blackboards, whiteboards and flip charts. There were maps and drawings and charts pinned on every available wall space. Some of them looked familiar to Roger. About twelve of the desks were occupied. Mostly men. All in dark clothes. All about thirty years old. All grim faced. The Captain stood at the front of the class.

'Good morning, gentlemen,' he said to the newcomers. Addressing the class he said, 'The sergeant you know. Take a good look at the gentleman to his right.'

Roger felt himself pink. He looked into the class. He recognised the grim face and dust bunny hair of one individual on the second row. It was Lenny Ludhoe. Lenny gave a friendly salute with one finger. Roger wasn't sure how to respond. Lenny had been about to hit him the last time they were together. Had he deserved it? Was Roger hysterical?

'This is The Expert,' The Captain continued, 'who we've been talking about for the past few months. It's the delivery, deployment and safe return of this individual that is your primary concern on this mission.' There was a long pause as the class studied Roger. Some made notes. Roger felt uncomfortable. Lenny grinned.

'Please sit down, gentlemen,' said The Captain at last.

Roger and Meadhill settled into empty seats.

'A quick summary of Key Points and Times,' said

GARY BAKER

The Captain turning back some pages on the flip charts. 'Seventeen hundred hours tomorrow' - Tomorrow! - 'leave Paull airfield. Arrive RAF Northolt to equipment check and dispersal to Trafalgar Square and Whitehall. Twenty hundred hours, move to secure the three entry points.'

Roger leaned forward studying some of the drawings. Although none were marked, he recognised Trafalgar Square, Admiralty Arch, the Admiralty Buildings, parts of Whitehall and Ministry of Defence, or MoD, buildings. Familiar outlines, not following the roads and buildings, were clearly marked.

Beneath the dense traffic, central London was riddled with tunnels dating back to the Second World War and beyond. Roger realised he was familiar with some of these tunnels. Some two years previously he had helped install a series of high security Programmable Digital Multiplexers, PDMX's, for the MoD. They were essentially communication and encryption devices that took numerous channels of data and information; voice, video, computer chatter; encrypted them, and passed them on to other PDMX's or out to secure channels across the Internet or private leased lines. Roger had built the encryption software. An unregistered and highly secret algorithm which, to date, no man or machine had been able to decrypt.

Roger was not surprised. New memories told him this was his special skill, after all. It was the fact that they had known it was Roger who was responsible for, and probably the only man on the planet who could master,

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these algorithms that was surprising. Roger was a state secret of almost unprecedented sensitivity. Someone very, very high up the ladder must be involved.

Like giant, ragged Manta Rays, some words glided over Roger's mind: trust, treachery, treason. Roger shook them off and forced his attention back to The Captain.

'Green team will secure entrance Bravo, Old Admiralty Buildings. Yellow team will secure entrance Golf-5 Horse Guard's Parade. Red team, carrying The Expert, will secure entrance Alpha-1 and proceed to tunnel entrance Hotel 1.'

The Captain flipped over a page on the flip chart. 'Following Red team carrying The Expert; negotiate and secure tunnel set Tango 1, deploy The Expert into room Charlie 1'

I hope the other guys are following this, thought Roger. A photographic memory was not on his list of talents. It was all strangely unreal. A film. A movie in glorious 3D. It was exciting and Roger was an important element. The key element.

For Roger's benefit The Captain took them through the routine a further three times. Essentially, Roger was to be 'deployed' into the communications room which was securely guarded and full of electronic equipment including the target PDMX. Roger would tap into a secure communications channel on the PDMX, receive further instructions and carry out whatever was required of him.

Two extraction points were to be secured at Horse Guard's Parade and The Old Admiralty Building. The

teams would disperse back to RAF Biggin Hill and fly North to Blackpool.

'Any questions,' asked The Captain looking at Roger.

Roger didn't want to ask any questions, didn't want to draw attention to himself. But The Captain's look wouldn't go away. 'Yes,' he said raising his hand unnecessarily. 'What am I to do with the Mux?' A real question. Thank goodness.

'Mux?' The Captain looked puzzled at the unfamiliar word.

'Mux. The PDMX. The communications device. What is it I'm supposed to do with it? If I don't know, how do I know what I'll need with me.'

'I've been assured everything you will need is in your head,' said The Captain. 'Anything else?'

Ask him, demanded Roger B. 'Yes, why Blackpool?' asked Roger.

'We get good rates at the Holiday Inn there,' said The Captain smiling. 'Now if that's all. Gentlemen, ladies, you have a lot of preparation to take care of. I'll see you at Seventeen Hundred hours at Paull Airfield, tomorrow. Dismissed.'

Roger began to stand but was motioned to stay by Meadhill. 'Back in a minute,' he said.

The room emptied in silence. Some of the 'students' studied him as they left. Roger tried to look impassive. Cool. Concentrate on the sounds. He could hear vehicles being started outside the classroom in the warehouse. Men barked orders, 'Over here!' It sounded

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like quite an operation.

When Roger was alone, he sat back looking at the charts and drawings again. RAF Northolt, Biggin Hill. This was serious stuff. Secure entrances. Deploy The Expert. Planning for months? This was very serious stuff.

And what does *your* Daddy do? Oh, he sneaks into secret military communications bunkers and taps into all kinds of information. British intelligence, MoD, government communications, US Army, even some high level banking transactions. Now there's a thought. Some major banks had bought access to the super encryption technology for the money transfer and clearing systems. That is a thought.

What does Daddy do mummy? Now then Harry, you know he's behind bars for robbing a bank. But you know we don't talk about Daddy anymore.

Don't think about Harry. Just do this and get a pile of money and ... then what? And ... what does mummy look like?

The door opening cut through Roger's thoughts. It was Meadhill.

'How about some ... fun?' said Meadhill showing Roger his gold tooth.

'Fun?'

'Yes, fun. For the rest of today you're going to get some weapons training to familiarise yourself with some of the tools of our trade. Nothing too ... detailed, you understand. Just so you have a basic understanding.'

'Great,' said Roger with genuine enthusiasm. 'Let's go.'

*

Roger was taken to meet some of the team. Muscular men, with broad shoulders, solid jaws and numbing handshakes. He guessed they were ex-army instructors, assigned to look after him at intervals of around an hour. Their care, attention to detail and obvious concern for safety issues, and their professionalism, were seemingly at odds with the reasons for being there.

There was a shooting range underneath the warehouse. Roger became familiar with a number of assault weapons with cold, inhuman names. The SA80A2, the L85IW. To Roger, they were all machine guns. Single shot or rattle them out at 700 rounds per minute. Whatever their names, they chewed up ply-board figures into splinters in milliseconds. What they would do to flesh and blood didn't bear thinking about.

It all came to an end far too quickly for Roger. When he pleaded for more time he was assured that the next day, before going to the airstrip, they would break out some pistols and revolvers and, if he was really lucky, they'd break out the grenades too.

Roger's ears rang, despite the ear-defenders. He was hungry, thirsty, ready for a shower and looking forward to seeing his new comrades for some socialising later that evening.

It was a game and he was a key player. The Expert. Respected. But what really was the game?

When he'd been employed by the MoD to install the PDMX's he'd promised to maintain complete confidentiality. He'd made a promise to the Queen and to

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God. With his hand on a Bible he thought of as fairy stories, they had made him swear to God and the Queen.

Well, God didn't exist and the Queen didn't know him from Adam so what the hell. And besides: Heather, the stocking-top girl, might be at dinner.

Chapter 7

Roger and Jennifer stood facing each other.

'So soon?' Jennifer asked. 'For such a long time, nothing. Then twice in ... how long has it been? I loose track of time in here.'

'I just wanted to say ... I just wanted to make sure ...'

'Don't worry. I will help.'

'It's not that,' Roger said, 'it's the job. I'm worried about the job. And what it's doing to me.'

'I don't do advice,' Jennifer said, turning away. 'You must make your own mind up.'

Roger walked round to face Jennifer.

'Look,' he said, 'you saw the plans. What do you think?'

'I think you need my help or these lunatics will cut off your balls.'

'What do you think of the plan? I trust your ...'

GARY BAKER

'Trust? Trust?' Jennifer moved closer to Roger. 'What happened with Julia? What happened to Harry? What happened to you?'

'I'll fix all that,' Roger said.

Jennifer clicked her tongue in disbelief. 'You have to go back,' she said.

'I will. Just as soon as this job is over. Okay?'

'Oh, Roger.' Jennifer shook her head.

There was a long silence.

'You're right,' Roger said at last. 'I will go back. I'll make it work. Somehow.' He gripped Jennifer's shoulders. 'After the job.'

Jennifer shrank back from his touch. Roger lowered his arms, paused for a second then headed for the door.

Alone again, Jennifer sat on the bed and thumbed through the manual. Numbers and symbols, and pictures and sounds danced in front of her. A thing of aching beauty. A beauty that brought tears to her eyes.

'No one to share it with,' she said out loud.

'You can share it with me, pretty one.' Loki's voice shattered her vision. Jennifer jumped further on to the bed. Loki smiled a mouth-only smile. 'Just remember what I told you.'

Jennifer stifled a sob. Loki left as stealthily as he had arrived; closing the door very slowly, very quietly, very carefully behind him.

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Chapter 8

Heather, the stocking-top girl was alone in the dining room. Waiting for him. God, she was beautiful.

She beamed at Roger, filling the whole of his field of view with her radiance. She took both his hands in hers, pulled Roger down and towards her as she went up on her toes to kiss his cheek.

Roger nearly collapsed at the smell of her. She was wonderful.

'Aw'right, darlin'?' she screeched in a voice that could take the plaque off your teeth at a hundred yards.

Roger woke with a start. A dream. He had dozed off on the bed. He laughed at the absurd dream. He could still feel her cool hands in his.

It was time. Roger splashed cold water onto his sleepy eyelids, dried his face and went down to dinner.

Heather, the stocking-top girl was there. God, she really was beautiful.

Meadhill had taken the seat at the top of the table. The Captain, apparently, would not be dining with them that night. Roger recognised some of the men and women from the classroom in the warehouse. And Heather, the stocking-top girl.

GARY BAKER

Heather beamed at Roger filling the whole of his field of view with her radiance. She took both his hands in hers, pulled Roger down and towards her as she went up on her toes to kiss his cheek. Big time déjà vu.

The scent of her galloped straight to his gonads.

'I missed you?' she purred in a surprisingly deep voice.

Roger snorted. 'Missed me?' Oh, God had he just snorted something out of his nose? 'You hardly know me.'

She let go of one hand and led him to their places at the table. Roger took the opportunity for a little sleeve on nose action. It didn't matter who saw as long as Heather didn't.

The chat around the table was mainly about football. Apparently there was an important match on that evening. Roger didn't even try to contribute. His knowledge of the game was limited to the rules. Heather gently pressed her fingernails against his inner thigh. He would have loved to place his hand on Heather's inner thigh too but he couldn't muster up the courage. Roger's testicles tingled their approval as Heather moved her hand closer.

Roger yearned for and dreaded the end of the meal. Heather made things very easy for him. The time for people to start saying their goodbyes arrived at last and she led him by the hand from the dining room. At the stairs she let go of his hand and walked slowly ahead of him. Being behind Heather going upstairs; the slow side to side motion of her hips and bottom, the short skirt

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playing peek-a-boo with her stocking-tops, those legs, oh, those legs. Roger had to swallow his excess saliva twice on the way to his room. Roger B commented that if his sperm count rose any higher it would reach his eyes and he would lose consciousness. He'd suffer a white out. Roger B and Roger C executed a mental high five.

In the bedroom, Heather was completely in charge. She undressed them both. Her body was perfection. Her large dark nipples and the merest hint of roundness to her belly making Roger giddy with desire. He dare not look at her secret place for fear of passing out. When Roger tried to pleasure her with lips and fingers she gently stopped him, encouraging him to relax and enjoy himself.

So Roger did. He let go. For the first time, ever. He completely let go. Usually there was a part of Roger which stood by, thought of the woman, observed, listened for interruptions. But not this time. Roger gave himself completely over to the sensations. Gave himself to this wonderful stocking-top girl.

*

The pistol range was set up for two shooters. Paper targets hung from a wires which could be moved to varying ranges depending on the expertise of the marksman and the weapon. Roger was given some basic instruction centring around only pointing the weapon downrange and not turning round if it jams for Christ's sake. Sorry.

First up was a pair of ear defenders and something called a Beretta PX4 .40 – a black, short barrelled automatic which Roger imagined someone stylishly evil

would carry.

'I could see Two-Face carrying one of these,' said Roger. The instructor looked at him blankly. 'The um, crime boss in Batman?' Nothing. 'Played by Tommy Lee Jones in the film? No?'

Roger kept further gun associations to himself.

The PX4 sounded like a whip being cracked, even through the ear defenders.

The Beretta 90 boomed big and mean.

The Bobcat, small enough to shove in your sock, felt toy-like and insincere after the 90.

Next, the brown handled Colt 80 automatic. 'That's one big fuck-off gun,' said Roger. 'Sorry.' I didn't just apologise for swearing did I? To these guys?

But Roger's favourites were the little Glock 39 automatic; very compact, looked good; and the Colt .357 revolver with quick loader; comfortable, powerful, very cool.

Afterwards, Roger joked, 'I now feel confident enough to blow my own foot off without endangering anyone around me.'

'Praise indeed,' said the instructor whose name escaped Roger. The man froze, listening to something in his ear piece. 'It's time,' he said.

The group of twelve plus Roger gathered close to the roller shutter entrance to the warehouse. Roger looked at the group. Everyone casually dressed and, except for Roger, carrying a bag over their shoulder.

Meadhill approached holding out a grey rucksack. 'Here, you'll need this,' he said giving the bag to Roger.

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'And this,' he said handing Roger an ear-piece and small transmitter. He helped Roger fit the ear-piece, pushing the transmitter down under his collar and clipping it onto his belt, tucking the wire behind his ear.

'What's in it?' asked Roger, holding up the rucksack. But Meadhill didn't have time to reply. The roller shutter doors started to rattle upwards. The noise triggered the sickness of anticipation in Roger's stomach.

A dark blue mini-bus waited for them outside. The group boarded the bus in an ordered fashion. The first person in moved to the back, the next person sat beside him and so on. Roger was the next to last to board and found himself wedged between a prematurely grey haired man, one of his instructors of the previous day, and a young lady he had noticed taking notes in the class room. Roger moved to put his rucksack on the floor between his feet.

'Keep it on your knee,' said the man to Roger's left. 'Do what we do.'

'Right. Thank you,' said Roger feeling like the new boy on the school bus.

The young lady to his right nodded and smiled. 'Piece of cake,' she said in a pleasant Scottish accent. Aberdeen, probably.

The drive to Paull's Airfield took them past rows of semi-detached, three bedroom, bay-windowed houses. Could be anywhere in Britain, thought Roger. But this time things seemed different. The scene outside was more like a film projected onto a huge canvas backdrop. The outlines of the house roofs against the white sky looked

flat; as if a gust of wind would blow them over and reveal them to be nothing more than cardboard cut-outs. A cheap film set.

The motion of the mini-bus was real though. No one spoke. The engine, wind and road noise seemed to be a recording. Played through a speaker system somewhere.

There were people out there. They had no idea what was happening in here. Roger wasn't sure what was happening either. He was part of something that rolled unstoppably on. Roger was important and was doing something and hardly had to think at all. All he had to do was follow. Yes, this way was much easier than before.

Wasn't it?

What was he doing just before those double doors at the Salvation Army? What is this closed memory-door blocking the way? Memories came through only when they wanted to. Invite them and they'd back off into the murk.

There was pain, said Roger C. Julia and Harry. Don't think about Harry.

*

They bumped over a dirt track road, through a gate and into the tree bordered space that was Paull's Airfield. Roger saw one of the few planes he could recognise waiting ahead of them. Rear doors down, four propellers blurred in rotation, distinctive hunched stance, the Hercules transport plane painted in dark army green razored a slash of excitement through Roger.

The mini-bus stopped, the door slid open. A torrent of noise flooded in.

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A hand on Roger's rucksack. The man to Roger's left signalled to him. A voice came in his ear, shouting over the noise, 'Stick with me.' And with that the man left the mini-bus heading towards the open rear of the Hercules. Roger followed, ducking down instinctively against the blast from the four propellers. Up the ramp and onto a narrow bench running the length of the plane. Stow the rucksack under the seat in netting and attach the safety harness.

No parachute, thought Roger. But no one else had one either. The noise was not so bad and the inside was not as big as Roger had imagined. All very Ridley Scot; monochrome grey, utilitarian, industrial, plenty of flashing lights.

For the first time Roger noticed a man in, what he imagined to be, full flight kit and oversized helmet. He was fastened to the floor by a long loose cable and directing the team into their positions. Finally, the flight crew member made hand signals to someone outside. The ramp lifted, clumping shut with a sucking wheeze as the man took his seat and strapped himself in.

The aircraft taxied, surged forward and rose steeply into the air. Ears popped. No windows, thought Roger. Missing the view.

Roger could see the team were relaxing. Preparing for an hour or so of introspection or snoozing. The noise made conversation impossible so Roger turned his thoughts to Heather, the stocking-top girl. When they had finished making love; or, more precisely, when Roger had finished being made love to; he tried talking to

Heather ...

'So, what do you do?' Roger had asked, awkwardly trying to strike up a conversation. How do you talk to someone you've known only for an hour or two and then had the best sex of your life with?

'Do?' Heather sat on the edge of the bed lifting and coiling her hair in preparation for a shower. The curve of her back was exquisite. Twin dimples at the base of her spine.

'You know. Work. Are you a model or an actress?'

Heather turned and smiled at Roger. 'You're not kidding are you?'

Roger could not help himself. 'God, you're so beautiful.' He placed his hand on hers.

'You're sweet.' She took her hand from under his and patting his arm. 'I must shower.' She stood then went into the bathroom.

She said I wasn't kidding. Perhaps implying she worked for a living was an insult. Probably loaded. Never worked in her life.

Roger laid his head back against the bulkhead of the plane, feeling the aircraft's powerful vibrations, and thought of Heather's fantastic arse bobbling away into the bathroom. No other word would do. Bum, bottom, behind. The American, ass. No good. No other way to describe it, it was a fantastic *arse*.

The tone of the aircraft changed. They were slowing, banking. Roger looked at his watch. Forty five minutes. Flown by, he thought.

The plane bounced once, decelerated quickly,

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turned and stopped. The crew member stood and the rear door descended quickly. The team was moving fast. Roger hurried to undo the harness, grabbed his rucksack and followed the rest out onto the runway.

Roger recognised RAF Northolt from the numerous times he had driven past it on his way to and from ... Roger couldn't remember. It was a long time ago. He used to live in Northolt. Didn't he?

He was guided to a white saloon and sat on the back seat between the same two he'd been with on the mini-bus. Mr Grey Hair and Miss Scotland. Another member of the team sat in the passenger seat. Roger dubbed him Mr Auxiliary.

A silent drive along the Western Avenue into London. The old Hoover building. Nice example of an Art 'deco building but the back was really ugly. How did he know that?

Into London. Boxy buildings, acres of glass. Traffic jams and people. Trafalgar Square at last. The group of three plus Roger disembarked. The sedan, a Peugeot Generic, disappeared into the evening traffic. They sat on the steps below a huge, black lion.

'Hungry?' asked Miss Scotland. Roger wondered if he should ask her name but decided against it. Miss Scotland would do nicely.

'Yes, now you come to mention it,' said Roger.

She pointed to Roger's rucksack. He opened it. On top, wrapped in cellophane, were salmon and cucumber sandwiches and a flask of tea. They were having a picnic in Trafalgar square!

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Roger could see that Mr Grey Hair had cheese salad, Mr Auxiliary had prawns and Miss Scotland had an apple. Who decided who got what? Salmon and cucumber was perfect.

People scurried and pigeons meandered comically. Roger squinted up and fancied he saw a hawk circling Nelson.

Mr Grey Hair looked at his watch. 'Time,' he said. 'There's an ID badge in your bag,' he continued. 'Put it on.'

The four crossed Trafalgar Square heading for the right side of Admiralty Arch. They pulled out photo-id badges which they hung round their necks as they walked. The North Entrance was a simple, smoked-glass doorway marked 'Strategy Unit'. In the lobby they were stopped by a security officer who checked each of their badges finally letting them through to the lifts and stairs.

They took the stairs down two levels to a locked metal door. Roger stood back as Mr Grey Hair and Miss Scotland took something out of their bags and knelt before the door. Mr Auxiliary stood halfway on the last flight down listening. There was a whirring sound and the door popped open an inch. Miss Scotland poked her head through then signalled for them to follow. The door opened into a small concrete lined lobby with three more identical metal doors facing them. Mr Auxiliary closed the door quietly behind him.

'Can you confirm it's the door on the left?' said Mr Grey Hair. The three looked at Roger.

Jennifer's voice seemed to come through his ear-

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piece, 'The door on the left,' she said. Roger repeated the instruction out loud. Thanks Jennifer. Right on cue.

Mr Grey Hair and Miss Scotland did their trick on the door again. This time with a lot more care and only the faintest whirring sound. Mr Grey Hair had little drops of sweat dangling from his sideburns.

The door popped open an inch. A half second later it was opened from the other side. A young soldier in combat fatigues stared for a moment open mouthed. His assault rifle pointed at the floor.

'This is ...' he began but a lightening fast punch to his throat from Mr Grey Hair stopped him. The young soldier was momentarily paralysed, more than enough time for Miss Scotland to push an eight inch blade deep into his heart. Mr Grey Hair caught him as he fell, dragged him across the floor and used his body to block the door they had entered through. Anyone following them would have a hard time opening that one.

Roger stood rooted to the spot transfixed by the ooze of thick blood draining from the body. Roger B marvelled at how quietly and how fast the young soldier had died when the blade had sliced through his heart. Roger C could only think; Jesus, Jesus, Jesus.

A slap from Mr Grey Hair rattled Roger's head leaving a fierce sting on his cheek.

'I'm okay,' said Roger.

Mr Grey Hair repeated the question that Roger had missed; 'Can you confirm: left down the tunnel, fourth door on the right.'

Roger relayed Jennifer's instructions, 'Left down

the tunnel, fourth door on the right.'

The four moved cautiously along the tunnel in single file. They synchronised, in step, heads pirouetting in unison. There's that word again, thought Roger. Comical.

The tunnel smelled of wet concrete. A light breeze from behind urged them on. Distant voices and harsh clangs galloped along the overhead pipes. Their soft rubber soles crunched on the gritty floor.

Mr Grey Hair led the way, counting doors under his breath.

Four! The door was locked but once again gave way to the persuasive Mr Grey Hair and Miss Scotland.

This room looked familiar. The smell of hot electronics, the low humming noise, Roger recognised this room filled with equipment. The cabinets with the PDMX's were on the far wall. Roger opened the floor to ceiling cabinet door. There they were. He would need a ... Roger opened his rucksack and found what he needed with surprise.

'Excellent,' he said. It was a small hand held computer with a cable and plug attached. Roger inserted the plug into a socket on the front panel of the top PDMX. He tapped some keys as the small screen sprang into life.

'Do you have the ID?' asked Miss Scotland.

'The Mux ID,' said Roger, reading from the small screen, 'is 8801'

Miss Scotland pulled out several envelopes settling on one with 8801 printed on the front. She opened it and

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handed the single sheet to Roger. Roger scanned the page.

'A four hour delay? Okay,' he said turning back to the small computer screen. 'I need the telemetry bit number for bid 7 on slot 23'

'Four,' Jennifer said into Roger's ear piece.

Roger entered the number. A stream of encrypted data flowed across the miniature screen. Roger inserted numeric codes into key portions of the list of symbols. An alarm sounded. The lights turned red.

Mr Auxiliary made a low noise at the doorway that could have been a curse.

'You've tripped the alarm!' said Mr Grey Hair.

'No, I definitely haven't,' said Roger. 'They must have found the body.'

'We must extract to room two!' said Mr Grey Hair urgently.

'One second,' said Roger tapping the keys, 'If I don't update the E-Squared the new instructions will be lost on re-boot.'

The three stood by as Roger tapped on the keys. Mr Auxiliary inhaled audibly several times as if to speak but said nothing.

'Done!' Roger said at last. He packed away the hand held computer and closed the cabinet doors. 'Ready,' he said.

The tunnel, now bathed in red light, was empty save for the sounds of shouting, stamping feet and a distant klaxon. Noises that were seemingly far off but getting closer. Miss Scotland closed and locked the door

while Mr Grey Hair and Mr Auxiliary moved to the next door along the tunnel. Without pausing, the two men raised their booted feet and kicked open the door, smashing the lock and splintering the frame. Roger felt the hideous noise was snatched up by the overhead pipes and flung away in both directions down the tunnel to shout: 'They're here, they're here!' Mr Grey Hair went inside and Roger could hear the crash of equipment being thrown to the floor.

Mr Grey Hair emerged. 'Red herring in place,' he said. 'Now let's extract.'

Adrenaline was making Roger's left knee shake. What a strange turn of phrase these guys have, thought Roger, stiffening his leg to calm its motion. The tension in his face made the side of his head hurt.

*

Pursued by shouts and stamping feet, the four jogged further along the tunnel. Mr Grey Hair took point with Mr Auxiliary at the rear running backwards for the most part. Roger followed closely behind Miss Scotland who had, he noticed, a very acceptable arse. But what was she carrying. Bloody hell. They were all carrying a short assault rifle. Roger felt in his rucksack. No gun. He was about to complain about his lack of weapon when a familiar chuck, chuck, chuck sound caused his heart to miss a beat. He recognised that sound from the firing range. That was only yesterday. Mr Grey Hair was firing his weapon in shot bursts. Jesus, Jesus. Stay calm.

They did not slow their pace, coming at last to a fallen uniformed figure. Roger tried to step over his

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bloodied form but the soldier opened his eyes and grabbed Roger's ankle in a grip of astonishing strength. Mr Auxiliary brought the butt of his rifle down hard into the young man's face smashing through his teeth and left cheekbone. The grip released and Roger was free to catch up with Miss Scotland. Behind him, the noise of pursuit seemed only yards away.

Chuck, chuck, chuck. Mr Grey Hair was firing again.

They were running at full stretch now. Roger jumped over another fallen soldier. Twisting and turning through the maze of doors and tunnels. Mr Grey Hair led the way knowing exactly where he was going.

Miss Scotland stopped in her tracks, spun and hauled Roger back as they ducked into an alcove. Pushed their backs against the wall. Weapons ready and breaths held. Six or seven armed soldiers ran past them.

The crunching boot steps faded and the four carried on for another twenty yards or so, stopping at a large green metal door. Miss Scotland pushed what looked like a cordless drill into the lock. A grinding whirr and the door popped open.

Through the door was a dead soldier, his eyes, mouth and throat open to the damp air.

A familiar figure leant and wiped blood off his knife onto the dead soldier's fatigues then stood and led them up some stairs, through three doors, collecting other team members as they ran. Finally, with daylight ahead, they stowed all weapons in their rucksacks and sauntered into the open air.

Roger recognised Horse Guard's Parade. I think I may be getting the hang of this staying calm business, he thought as his heart rate began to subside and he got his breathing under control. Wish I'd brought my camera.

Miss Scotland had brought hers. Mr Grey Hair posed next to a mounted Guardsman as Miss Scotland took his picture. Roger could see the back of Mr Auxiliary heading down Whitehall. The others had gone, dispersing among the evening tourists.

Roger felt an uneasy calm, told himself he'd enjoyed the excitement, pushed away images of dead and dying young Englishmen. Dismissive thoughts that rubbed and pressed like someone else's shoes.

He listened to the sirens crying around Trafalgar Square and watched Mr Grey Hair and Miss Scotland do the tourist thing. His thoughts turned back to the pictures the encrypted data from the PDMX had conjured in his mind and to what he had done with the data. That PDMX was a primary, secure node on the Internet Backbone as it passed through the United Kingdom. Hundreds of millions of transactions passed through it; and devices like it at other key locations around London. A significant proportion of the World's trillions of dollars of transactional revenue carried out on the Internet was now being diverted to a set of Swiss Holding accounts and held for four hours before being released back into the transaction stream. This additional delay, on top of the deliberate delay introduced by the banking systems themselves, would go unnoticed. Perhaps for years to come. The interest accruing would be ... a number

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popped into his mind.

Roger was impressed. The KOPALDA had prepared, organised and, of course, recruited, with exceptional skill. That had been a very interesting exercise, but there had to more to it than he was privy to.

An unease crept into Roger's thoughts. Would they need him from now on?

A voice disturbed him. 'Do you need me anymore?' Jennifer asked.

'I don't know,' he replied. 'I really don't know.'

*

A tube journey, train and taxi ride, found Roger, Miss Scotland and Mr Grey Hair at the rear of a very dark Biggin Hill Airfield.

During the trip from Central London, the image of the young soldier's face replayed across Roger's mind. The moment when Miss Scotland's blade entered his heart, when life turned to death. The young soldier's teeth bared like a grimacing dog.

Roger briefly considered making a run for it. But the thought of hiding from an organisation with the resources that The KOPALDA clearly commanded would be foolish. Better to stick around. Maybe make himself useful again.

They dismissed the taxi and, when it had disappeared, Mr Grey Hair pulled out a small torch. The beam picked out a four bar gate. They clambered over and approached a prefabricated hut with a single glowing window.

A door on the side opened before they got there

and a dark figure stood outlined against the yellow interior. 'There's an hour to kill yet so there's coffee in here for you.' It was Meadhill.

Roger was last into the hut and took a seat beside Mr Grey Hair and Miss Scotland.

'Let me take those,' said Meadhill, holding his hands out for the rucksacks. They all handed the bags over and Meadhill placed them on a table on the other side of the hut. A small television on the end of the table was tuned to the news. Pictures showed police cars parked haphazardly around the Admiralty Building and ambulances sirening away past Admiralty Arch. A moving headline along the bottom of the screen said: Terrorist attack on MoD foiled. The voiceover explained how an armed gang of terrorists had killed three brave young soldiers and critically injured two others while attempting to steal mortars and rocket propelled grenades from secure bunkers beneath the MoD buildings in Whitehall. Questions were being raised as to why such weapons were being kept in the centre of London. Meadhill clicked a button on the front of the television. The channel changed and a programme playing old popular music favourites had Lulu belting out her signature song.

'Say!- Say that you love me

Say!- Say that you need me'

When Meadhill turned round he had an automatic pistol with silencer in his hand. Without hesitation he shot Miss Scotland in the face.

'Say!- Say that you want me'

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Mr Grey Hair was half way across the floor to Meadhill when a bullet hit him in the sternum punching a large black hole as big as an open hand out of his back splattering Roger with blood, flesh and bone fragments.

Mr Grey Hair crashed to the floor skidding on his face to within an inch of Meadhill's boot.

'Say!- Aint gonna grieve me'

Meadhill shot him unnecessarily through the back of the head. Mr Grey Hair's mangled head bounced and lay still. Mr Grey Hair no longer. Mr Red Hair.

'Say!- Oh come on now'

Meadhill noisily sucked excess saliva through his teeth, switched off the television and turned towards Roger, saw the look on his face and quickly placed the gun down on the table behind him.

Roger believed he was going to die. In the moment before Meadhill put down the gun, Roger thought that no matter what he did now, it was the end. In a moment of epiphanous clarity, Roger saw himself embedded in a Universe whose only hope to continue, was in the lives and minds it created, which could somehow, sometime, figure out how to carry the seed of this Universe into another place. Intelligence was the Universe's way of trying to guarantee its own survival. I thought your life was supposed to flash before your eyes, thought Roger B, what the hell was that? Roger C screamed, say something! in his head. Tell him you know how to win the lottery! Anything!

Meadhill held his hands in front of his body, palms turned down. 'Don't worry,' he said. 'Just tidying up ...

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loose ends. You are not, and never will be, a loose end. Okay?'

Roger blinked back from the abyss and looked down at himself. 'I'm covered in blood,' he said. 'Can I wash somewhere.'

'No problem,' said Meadhill, 'There's a shower and a full change of clothing through there.'

Roger went to a door where Meadhill pointed. There was a shower, towels, clothes and a toilet into which Roger vomited.

When Roger was ready, Meadhill led him out onto the dark airfield to a small Cessna aircraft. Meadhill climbed into the pilot's seat instructing Roger to take the co-pilot's position. Meadhill started the engine and taxied out onto the runway. Without requesting clearance or making radio contact of any kind, Meadhill gunned the engine and made the little aircraft roar into the night sky.

'Can we get to Blackpool non-stop?' asked Roger looking down at the speckled islands of light below him.

'And back if we wanted to,' said Meadhill. 'You relax, Mr Peerson' he said. 'Try and get some sleep.'

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Chapter 9

Jennifer Penrose looked at herself in the mirror. Her head was healing. Her hair was starting to grow back. Loki was behind her! She froze, one hand touching her new hair.

How did he do this new terror? How did he manage to get in without making a sound?

'Didn't mean to startle you.' His tone said the opposite of his words. 'I've brought you something. By way of a thank you.'

He reached round to Jennifer's left and placed a box of milk chocolates on the dressing table in front of her. He reached round to her right with a Champagne flute and an open bottle of Champagne glistening with condensation.

Jennifer looked from the Champagne to the chocolates. Listened to the door closing. The lock turning.

I must still be useful, she thought.

Chapter 10

Sat with his knees clenched and arms folded, Roger slept fitfully in the little plane. During periods of full wakefulness, he looked down at the lights moving slowly below. At times, it seemed as though the droning, bumpy little cockpit was all there was. All there would ever be. The past was a dream. The cosy, secure little cocoon would carry him droning through space forever. No tomorrow. No problems.

Roger sneaked looks at Meadhill. Once again, Roger couldn't help but think of the dandruff problems Meadhill left himself open to. The greenish glow from the instruments gave Meadhill an unnatural pallor, a pallor exacerbated by black hair, black polo-neck, black trousers. His watch-strap was black. Straight nose, superman chin. Would he be considered handsome? Don't know, but he's a cold killer, no doubt about that. Seemed to kill those two without raising his heartbeat. Paused only to wipe the blood off his shoes, with a piece of kitchen-roll. A cold, sterile killer. The Sterilizer.

Blackpool airport arrived spread out ahead of them. A harsh line of white lights served to underline the jumble of orange street lighting to the North. To the East;

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subdued lights, a smattering here and there with a hint of dark texture, to the West; the black flat sea.

Meadhill chattered away into his microphone getting permission for this, confirming that.

There was a crosswind and, as they got closer to the landing lights on the ground, Roger realised they were swerving and pitching rather too much for comfort. They bounced once on landing before sticking to the ground and rolling along. Roger was surprised at how bumpy the runway was and could feel every crack and stone shocking up through his seat. What did they say? Any landing you can walk away from is a good one?

Meadhill taxied the Cessna into a hangar and turned off the engine.

Roger thought of the cliché 'deafening silence' as the high buzz in his ears replaced the roar of the aircraft's motor.

He shouldered open the door and jumped down on stiff legs. He walked around the front of the plane, smelt and felt the heat coming from the engine casing. He gingerly touched the propeller surprised at its coolness and offered a silent thank you to the little craft for bringing him safely back to land.

A large man in a dark suit waited outside the hangar. He leaned casually against a black Jaguar, nodded silently to them and got into the driver's seat. Meadhill and Roger got into the back seat.

They drove, unchallenged, out of the airport then north along South Shore.

To their left, tram lines. And beyond the

promenade, barrier lights picked out the piers as they strode confidently into the black seas over beaches that Roger knew were rippled by tides and currents. Undulations in the hard sand that were uncomfortable to walk on with young bare feet.

To their right the bright lights of amusement arcades, bingo halls, fish and chip shops and ice cream parlours.

Eventually they turned into an underground car park beneath a building imaginatively named The Sea View Hotel.

The driver gave Roger keys for room 608. He gave keys for room 609 to Meadhill with instructions to attend a meeting in room 808 within the hour.

Roger expected, and found, a change of clothing, a new toothbrush and a selection of toiletries. He showered for the second time in as many hours, changed into the dark clothing he found in his cupboard. The mundane activity was achieved with barely a thought passing across Roger's mind. He was ready and about to leave his room when someone knocked at his door. It was Meadhill.

'Ready?' asked Meadhill.

'Perfect timing,' said Roger.

They took the lift to the eighth floor in silence.

Room 808 turned out to be a suite. The door was answered by Mr Auxiliary.

Roger extended his hand. 'Mr Auxiliary,' he said. 'Good to see you made it okay.'

The man looked at Roger with the air of someone

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tolerating a small child's amusing antics. Roger's hand hung, unshaken, in midair.

'I don't know what else to call you,' explained Roger dropping his hand. Mr Auxiliary gestured for Roger and Meadhill to proceed into the lounge area of the suit.

The Captain stood up from a laptop computer to greet them. He fastened two of the buttons of the jacket of his dark suit around his generous belly.

'Congratulations, gentlemen,' said The Captain. 'I see our little ruse is paying dividends already.'

The word 'ruse' struck Roger like a slap in the face. People had died for a ruse?

'Do you mind if I ask,' began Roger, 'what those dividends are?'

'You tell me,' said The Captain. 'The current parameters are set to target a small portion of the total throughput. Two hundred and fifty thousand pounds per hour being delayed for four hours. Let's say that's one million pounds on deposit at any one time. We're getting, on average of say, five percent.'

'That's only fifty thousand pounds a year,' said Roger incredulously. 'I don't need the little voice in my head to tell me we've probably spent more than that outfitting everyone in matching dark shirts.'

The Captain's hair was quite grey, his eyebrows the brown of earlier years. The combination emphasised dark eyes which he narrowed coldly. 'I'm not sure I like your tone, Mr Peerson.'

'I'm sorry,' said Roger, 'but it seems to me that

innocent people, young soldiers just doing their job, have died unnecessarily for this – what amounts to in the scheme of things - trifle.'

'If the fifty thousand pounds a year was all, I would agree,' said The Captain. 'Please, sit down.' The Captain gestured for Meadhill and Roger to sit. 'I will explain.'

The Captain unbuttoned his jacket, sat back down and lit a cigarette. Through a curtain of smoke he said, 'What you achieved yesterday has gone some way to prove a little theory that some of us have been toying with over the last year or so. Is it possible to, for want of a better word, hack, into one of the world's most secure data stream, alter it permanently in some way to our advantage, and then leave without the alteration being detected for; 24 hours, a week, months?'

'You could have just asked me,' said Roger.

'With all due respect,' said The Captain meaning it, 'we had to be sure.'

'I take it it's not just some kind of idle intellectual experiment?' asked Roger.

'Indeed not,' said The Captain. 'Now that we have confirmed our little theory, and assuming your - patch? - stays in place for the next seven days or so, there is a much more interesting game to be played.'

'And until then?' asked Roger, knowing The Captain was not going to give him any more details.

'Until then?' The Captain stood, buttoned his jacket and spread his arms wide. Beamed. 'Until then you can relax. Enjoy the hospitality of The KOPALDA.'

*

NURSE BECKY GETS SHOT

Anyone who says Blackpool is England's answer to Las Vegas might have been to one place or the other, but not both. Or perhaps neither.

Roger remembered: he had been to Las Vegas on a trip to the Comdex Computer Exhibition some years previously. He had stayed in a huge hotel shaped like a pyramid. The Luxor. Like millions before him, Roger had walked the strip in Las Vegas, thoroughly impressed by the audacity and gall of that homage to American overconfidence and greed.

In Blackpool, like thousands before him, Roger had promenaded the beach-front, dulled by the mind numbing dullness of row after row of inexpensive glowing plastic decoration.

But the children were enthralled. More instant memories: Roger had loved it as a child too. He'd spent hours in traffic jams cruising the Golden Mile, his mother patiently at the wheel of an old three wheeler Bond Mini.

Part of the entertainment was counting the cars broken down at the side of the road. The slow moving lines of traffic had been too much for many early cooling systems and the engines had overheated. Their bonnets high, engines steaming into the cold night air. It looked to young Roger like the dead cars' souls rising up to heaven.

Now he had more sophisticated tastes. Or was he just a snob. Part of the mocking masses, sneering at something that was once their own favourite when they were innocent, uncritical, open and receptive.

In this Blackpool, Roger was never alone. Mr Auxiliary was always with him. Silent and humourless.

Never closer than five yards, never farther away than twenty. Roger toyed with the idea of trying to lose him. Just for fun. But fun didn't seem to be Mr Auxiliary's thing and it was hard to shake the image of him impassively crushing a young soldier's face with the butt of an assault rifle.

By day four, Roger had taken to staying in his room. The lap-dancing clubs had made him ache for Heather and, even with his card-counting skills, or maybe because of them, the casinos held no fascination for him.

Roger lay on his hotel room bed watching a small spider walk across his ceiling and deliberately emptied his mind. At such times memories leaked through from wherever they were dammed up. Roger had been to Blackpool before. A holiday with his mother. A chess tournament. His hand shook with nerves each time he moved a piece. He'd lost in the final to a blonde girl with pink glasses who sniffed all the time. He was ten. The fun house where the steep slide took your breath away and the spinning wooden saucer, no, a giant record player, had made him feel ill. Sand everywhere, making the tops of his legs and his bottom sore. A small boarding house with narrow stairs and a glass door to the bathroom. His mother turning bright pink in the sun. A friend. A girl in shorts his age. His mum took a photograph of them wrestling happily on the beach. That photograph still existed somewhere. In an album with other photographs of Roger on a donkey, Roger with a monkey. 'That's you on the left,' mum always joked when they leafed through the mostly black and white pictures. School photographs

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– he remembered practising the smile. Pictures of Roger in familiar hand knitted jumpers. Lists kept flat under clear plastic. Lists of cars. Lists of football players. Lists of Norse Gods. Roger had loved lists. Memories. Waiting for a number eleven bus on Common Edge Road. Sometimes Roger would walk to avoid the teasing. Freak-a-zoid. Freak-a-zoid. Roger was different, quiet, clever, but sometimes what people said didn't make sense. Sometimes teachers said, 'Sit down now, please,' when what they really meant was, 'return to your own desk now then sit down on your chair.' How the hell was he supposed to know the difference? Well now he knew. He'd memorised the differences. Freak-a-zoid. Freak-a-zoid.

Roger sat up. Some memories weren't worth having. But you are your memories. Without them you're someone else. New ones make you change into a different person. The old you dies a million times.

You are your memories. Without them you're just a bias towards moods.

*

He'd met Meadhill in the hotel lobby on the afternoon of day five of his stay and enquired how things in general were progressing. Meadhill replied, truthfully Roger thought, that he knew as little as Roger at that time and was simply taking the time to relax and catch up on some horse racing.

'Will, um,' Roger rubbed the back of his head. 'Will Heather be joining us at any time?'

Meadhill frowned at him. 'Who?'

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'Oh, just ...' Roger felt foolish. 'Horse racing? I've never even been into a betting shop. Wouldn't know what to do.'

Meadhill continued to frown at him.

*

On day eight, Roger decided to take advantage of the morning sunshine and go for a promenade along the seafront. Mr Auxiliary followed ten yards behind. A cool, salty breeze threatened to make Roger's nose run.

Roger, mind empty, was leaning on the sea wall looking down at the littered beach when Mr Auxiliary tapped him on the shoulder and pointed to a black Jaguar waiting for him by the side of the road.

At last, thought Roger.

With Roger and Mr Auxiliary in the back, the Jaguar performed a squealing u-turn and headed south. With choppy, steel blue seas to their right, they drove out of Blackpool and along the coast road towards Lytham St. Anne's.

'There's a good golf course along here somewhere, isn't there?' offered Roger by way of conversation. Mr Auxiliary and the driver remained impassive.

'Look, Mr Auxiliary,' said Roger, 'I haven't had a conversation that didn't involve the exchange of money for days now, so how about you give me a break and maybe loosen up a little?'

Mr Auxiliary looked straight ahead. Roger noticed the driver glance briefly at them in the rear view mirror.

'How about telling me your name then? I can't keep calling you Mr Auxiliary.'

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Mr Auxiliary turned to Roger and opened his mouth. Wide.

At first Roger didn't know what this meant then he realised with a start that, where there should have been a pink, moist muscular tongue, was a grizzled jagged stump of a thing in the back of Mr Auxiliary's mouth.

'Oh,' said Roger, embarrassed. 'Sorry. I had no idea.'

Mr Auxiliary reached inside his pocket and pulled out a pen and notepad. He wrote something and handed it to Roger.

'I like Mr Auxiliary,' Roger read out loud.

'Good. Can I call you Aux for short?' he asked.

'No, on second thoughts, sounds too much like ox.'

The Jaguar slowed, pulled left into a side road and stopped opposite some sand-dunes that would have had small children clammering to leave the car and play. Let's roll down the sand-dunes, Daddy. Pretend to shoot me and I'll fall down. Look, Daddy, it doesn't hurt. The sand's as soft as anything.

Don't think about Harry.

The driver waited, staring into the rear view mirror, focussing past Roger and Mr Auxiliary. Something must have happened because the driver eased the car forward and headed towards the once British Racing Green double doors of a stand-alone, ramshackle garage fifty yards further along the road. The twin doors opened as the car approached. They glided into the dark interior and the floor dipped down onto a steep slope threatening to have Roger slide forward from his seat.

The driver flipped on the lights to illuminate the concrete walls and floor sloping down and round to the right. The underground passage levelled out at a security barrier where the black Jaguar came to a halt. Powerful lights shone into the car and, between them, a ceiling mounted camera studied them with its Cyclops eye. The security barrier lifted and the Jaguar pulled through and into one of several parking bays. Two other identical black Jaguars were parked next to each other. Roger noticed they had the same number-plates. K094 LDA. He got out of the Jaguar and followed Mr Auxiliary, who took the lead for once, towards the only door. Looking back he saw the car he had arrived in was indistinguishable from the other two.

How extraordinarily brash, thought Roger.

The door opened into a room filled with cigarette smoke. Darkly dressed, armed men and women sat around smoking and drinking from black mugs. Some screens on the far wall showed CCTV images of the road outside, the entrance passageway, the security barrier, the parking area, the room they were in and other rooms Roger did not recognise.

A burly woman approached Roger and Mr Auxiliary with a metal loop dangling from her wrist.

'Weapons on the table,' she grunted.

Mr Auxiliary had a .38 special under his arm and a black knife at his ankle. He placed both on the table. Roger had one small, red, Swiss Army knife which he placed on the table next to Mr Auxiliary's weapons. It looked pathetic. A dead goldfish.

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Roger looked at the woman and held his hands in front of her. 'These are deadly weapons too,' he joked. 'Where should I leave them?'

In one swift, irresistible movement, the woman grabbed Mr Auxiliary's knife, took hold of Roger's right hand, dragged his arm over the table and held the blade over his wrist threatening to sever his hand from his arm.

Roger's arm was pinned. He couldn't move it.

'Want to leave it here, darling?' she asked, in a high South London accent. Her breath smelled of stale coffee. Mr Auxiliary smiled. Roger looked at him. Some onlookers chuckled.

'So you do have a sense of humour after all,' said Roger, trying to appear unconcerned.

The woman let Roger go then stabbed the knife hard into the table top millimetres from his hand.

She took the metal loop and ran it quickly around their bodies. Satisfied, she said, 'Follow me.'

A door at the far side of the room opened into a passageway which was the start of a whole warren of tunnels.

'Tunnels seem to be a big thing in my life, these days,' said Roger. 'But I suppose The KOPALDA is an underground organisation, hey?' For God's sake shut up, thought Roger B. It's the nerves. I'm not funny. Why am I trying to be funny? With these two, of all people.

They stopped at an unmarked white door. It opened with no visible effort from anyone. The woman stood back to let Roger and Mr Auxiliary through into a large white walled room. Chairs lined sections of the

walls and a dark wooden oval table, big enough to seat fifty, stood at the room's centre. Meadhill and The Captain sat at the far end. The Captain's grey hair and beard looked almost white next to Meadhill's black hair and black clothing.

Mr Auxiliary took a seat by the door.

The Captain stood, buttoned his jacket around his plump waist. 'Join us, please Mr Peerson,' he said.

'Quite a place you have here,' said Roger, taking a seat next to Meadhill. Meadhill nodded silently and made his mouth smile showing Roger his gold tooth again.

'The experiment,' said The Captain, ignoring Roger's pleasantry, 'was, and still is, a success.'

Roger felt his shoulders relax. He breathed more easily.

'We now feel confident we can move onto the next phase,' said The Captain.

Roger sat forward attentively.

'You will stay here from now on,' said The Captain, 'From now until the exercise is complete.'

'You mean here?' asked Roger, open palms indicating the room around them, 'In this underground ...' Roger did not know what to call it. Bunker?

'Complex,' said The Captain. 'Yes.'

'How long will that ...' began Roger, but The Captain cut him off.

'Until the exercise is complete,' repeated The Captain curtly. 'Completed to my satisfaction.'

'And then what?' asked Roger, starting to feel nervous again.

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'And then we shall see,' said The Captain. 'In the meantime -' The Captain stopped and stiffened, listening to something. Meadhill frowned. The Captain stood, 'Mr Peerson,' he said, 'The Major would like to meet you.'

An almost invisible door in the wall to Roger's left slid open.

'How very James Bond,' said Roger, immediately wishing he hadn't. He stood and moved towards the door. Watch out for Donald Pleasance stroking a white cat, thought Roger B. Shut up.

The door opened into an office which wouldn't have looked out of place in an old London Solicitors. Aged wood and leather furniture, bookcases filled with encyclopaedic tomes. A computer screen sat on the edge of the green topped desk behind which sat a Humpty Dumpty of a man wearing a pin-striped suit and talking into a telephone.

'Quite,' he said. The single word spoke of Eton or Harrow or some other public school that spat out boys who over pronounced their P's and rolled their R's. He motioned Roger to sit in the leather chair facing the desk. 'I don't foresee any problems there either, sir.' A tinny voice on the other end of the phone said something Roger could not understand and The Major replaced the receiver in its cradle. 'Mr Peerson,' he said, 'good to meet you.' His jowls wobbled as he spoke.

Roger leaned forward to stand and shake the Major's hand but The Major sat motionless studying an open file on his desk. Roger settled back down.

'Just refreshing my memory,' said The Major. 'You

have quite extraordinary talents, Mr Peerson. You have had some disappointments and tragedy in your life too, I see.'

Roger looked puzzled. 'Tragedy?' he asked.

'Yes, I agree. Tragedy is too small a word.' The Major turned a page of Roger's file. 'Ah, yes,' he said reading on, 'interesting.' After a minute of reading he closed the file. 'Your performance during the, shall we say, test run, seems to indicate that all is well and that you're fully recovered.'

Roger suppressed the urge to ask the man to explain himself. Recovered? Recovered from what?

'I must apologise for The Captain's abruptness,' continued The Major. The last word causing his jowls to wobble particularly horribly. 'He is not employed for his tact. His talents lie in other directions. You will, of course, continue to stay at the hotel and come and go as you please. I will have a car assigned to your escort.'

Roger could feel The Captain shuffle uncomfortably behind him. There was no love lost between these two and that may come in useful some day.

The Major steepled his fingers.

Where had Roger seen that recently? Here's the church and here's the people, open the doors and here's the people. He forced his concentration back to The Major.

'... phase is critical for The KOPALDA's future,' The Major was saying. 'I can't emphasise enough the importance of your contribution and, of course, the level

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of your rewards.'

The Major grasped the arms of his chair and hauled his bulk into a standing position with a grunt. He started to stroll around the office, hands clasped behind his back, head bowed.

'You are aware that, as an organisation, The KOPALDA's actions are based, to a certain degree, on a philosophy of unaccountability. That the consequences of one's life and actions are, for all intents and purposes, non-existent. That as many minutes, of as many days, of as many years as possible, should be spent in the completely selfish pursuit of pleasure and that all deity based religions are an anathema.'

Roger heard the words and marvelled at how The Major could talk about selfishness and self-obsession with such conviction and confidence as if they were attributes at least as admirable as the more traditional qualities of compassion, bravery or self-denial. The repeated words rang hollow like a tolling bell. The delivery made sense. But the philosophy wasn't real was it? Wasn't it all, made up? Did this guy believe his own marketing?

'But,' continued The Major, 'The KOPALDA also recognises that the true Hedonist needs others' co-operation in order to capture that which he pursues and that there is one single common denominator transcending all others which, when utilised to its fullest extent, will ensure, not only co-operation but, in the end, capture that true and illusive ...' The Major paused, searching for words.

Roger's mind was churning. He wasn't sure he followed what The Major was saying.

The Major gave up his search. 'Fundamentally,' he said, 'as far as all of us should be concerned; money *can* buy you happiness. So it is the pursuit of money, and the means to distribute it to its members throughout the organisation, that is The KOPALDA's primary tenet.'

The Major, slightly out of breath, glooped into the chair behind his desk, steepled his fingers once more and studied Roger.

What was all that about? Why repeat the PR blurb? He's making sure I'm on board. He needs me.

Roger felt the silence demanded he say something. 'The means justifies the end?' he offered.

'Quite.'

The Major continued to study Roger as if making his mind up about something. He broke the silence.

'The communications network you successfully modified,' said The Major, 'is one of three, practically identical networks.'

Roger sat forward with interest. 'That would make sense,' he said. 'Are the other two belt and braces backups?'

'Very nearly,' said The Major. 'The official line is almost exactly that. Two backup networks in two locations to cover multiple disaster scenarios. The reality is though, that one network is, indeed, a mirror of the one that you are familiar with. But the other network is far more interesting. More precisely: the information number three network carries is all level nine.'

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Roger frowned, in the context of information carried on a network, a 'level nine' was MoD speak for as secret as it got. This was the Queen's real-income-secret, the PM's tax-liability-secret, or even, nuclear-launch-code-secret.

'Oh My God,' said Roger in alarm, 'you want me to get the nuclear launch codes for some submarine or other, then you can blackmail the government?'

'Mr Peerson,' said The Major, 'we already know the launch codes.'

Chapter 11

Jennifer sat cross-legged on the bed leafing through the comfortable familiarity of the manual. She was aware Roger was standing behind her.

'You haven't been back,' she said.

Roger looked down at his shoes.

'Have Julia and Harry just ceased to exist for you now?' Jennifer cattle-prodded Roger with her words.

'This next job's really serious,' Roger said, ignoring Jennifer's taunt. 'I know what it sounds like but I'm almost sure this will be the last time. After this it will be golden beaches, palm trees, a shack with a straw roof and slatted floors.'

'A shack?'

'Yes,' Roger said, 'from the film Road to Morocco or Road to Singapore, I'm not sure which, Bob Hope and Bing Crosby? I saw it when I was an impressionable youth and there's a scene where the two are staying in a shack by the beach living off the local fruit. Seemed like a definition of heaven to me. Back then.'

Jennifer closed the manual. 'So you came to ask my help again?' she said. 'Why on earth do you bother? You know I have zero choice in the matter!'

'I just want you to say it's all right. Give me your blessing, sort of thing.'

Jennifer turned and looked into Roger's eyes. 'Don't you think you'd be better off if you could remember these things without my help?'

Roger shuffled uneasily. 'I've tried.'

Jennifer sighed knowing it was useless to pursue the idea. 'It's your life.'

There was a long pause but Roger did not leave.

'Why do you think we're here?' Roger asked.

Jennifer knew it was a life, the universe and everything question. Roger was still prone to those.

'Does there have to be a reason?' Jennifer asked.

'Without a reason it's all meaningless.'

'Does it have to have meaning?'

'Then what's the point?'

'Does there have to be a point?'

'Isn't that very sad?' Roger asked.

'There's still fun, table tennis, farting, flowers, a child's laughter. All that good stuff just doesn't go away

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because it doesn't need to be there.'

'Farting?' asked Roger with a chuckle.

'See?' Jennifer said.

Roger smiled and left.

Jennifer looked at the closed door. If things ran true to form she'd be getting another visit from Loki on the benefits of co-operation. And sure enough. Here he was, filling her with dread, again.

Chapter 12

Back in his hotel room at The Sea View Hotel, Roger lay on his bed looking at the ceiling. There was the taste of copper in his mouth. It was the taste of tiredness. The revelation from The Major was careering around the wall of death in his head stopping him from sleeping.

They knew the launch codes! Was he serious? Was he bluffing? Why would he bluff? How did they get them? Did they steal them? Did they blackmail someone into giving them up? Did they torture someone? These were launch codes for goodness sake. Not someone's PIN number. Who knew the launch codes anyway? Not even the Captain of a nuclear submarine knew them until he opened the envelope. But what about the land based ICBM's; they used a different method. How high did you

have to go to get them? Or how low. After all, a painter and decorator, proud and respected profession though it is, is a lowly character compared to the admiral of the fleet or the Prime Minister. But it's the painter and decorator who puts the finishing touches on the door frame into the most secret vault in Britain.

Roger shook his head. His thoughts were flying at tangents. Where the hell had painters and decorators come from?

Assume they do have the launch codes. Assume they could somehow be sent to activate a missile. Then what? Blow up part of China? Hold the world to ransom?

Roger rose and sat on the edge of the bed.

He should phone Julia. Listen to a sane voice. Maybe speak to Harry. What would he say about where he's been?

Roger picked up the phone. What was the number? Roger hit zero and the rest just came to his fingers. It was ringing. There was that strange feeling behind his sternum again.

The ringing stopped. A pause. Wrong number? Was there something wrong with the phone?

'Hello?' It was Julia.

'Hi.'

'Roger?'

'Yes.'

'Roger, where are you?'

'I'm ...'

'Roger, tell me where you are and I'll come and get you.'

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'No. I just thought I'd let you know I was still alive.' God, that sounded lame.

'I'm glad you called, Roger. I was worried about you.'

'Yes.'

'You know I was worried about you, don't you Roger.'

'Yes.' She does sound worried, but is she going to use my name in every sentence?

'Good. Now tell me where you are and I'll come and get you.'

'No. I can't.'

'Roger,' there was a long pause from Julia, 'why did you call me?'

'I told you.'

'There's another reason, isn't there, Roger.'

'I'd like to talk to Harry. Is Harry there?'

'You can't talk to Harry, Roger.'

'When will he be there, I'll call back.'

'Roger, you know you can't talk to Harry. Now tell me where you are, I'll come and get you and we'll have a nice chat. Maybe a drink of that spicy green tea you like so much.'

'No. I ...'

'What is it, Roger?'

Roger's mind started to tumble. Tunnel vision threatened.

'Roger? Are you all right?'

'Do I really like spicy green tea?'

'Yes, Roger. Spicy green tea and Jasmine green

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tea. Don't you remember?'

'I'm ... I'm having trouble with my memory.'

'That's understandable, Roger. Do you know where you are?'

'Of course. Yes. Look, put Harry on right now. This is not fair.'

'Roger, I can't. Now calm down. Just relax. Give me your phone number and I'll call you back.'

'I don't know what it is. Just dial 1471.'

'The number has been withheld, Roger. Why can't you tell me where you are?'

'How do you know that?'

'How do I know what, Roger?'

'How do you know the number has been withheld?'

'I have one of those little machines which display the caller's number, Roger.'

'When did you get that? And why do you keep saying my name?'

'I've had it for ages, Roger. Listen, I'm worried about you. Please, tell me where you are.'

'I can't and besides ... I wanted to ask you something but it doesn't make sense right now.'

'Ask me anything, Roger. You know I'll always listen. You know I care about you.'

There was a loud knock on the door. 'Maid service,' said a voice from outside.

'I have to go,' said Roger. He could hear Julia's voice, sounding tinny now it was away from his ear, calling his name as he replaced the receiver.

'Come in,' he called.

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*

Roger sat in the passenger seat of the black Jaguar recently allocated to him. Mr Auxiliary seemed to enjoy driving it, accelerating with gusto and turning the steering wheel with the palm of one hand. They had left the hotel two minutes before and were heading south to the underground complex near Lytham St Anne's and a meeting with The Major.

Mr Auxiliary clicked on the radio. A woman was talking about a hospice she founded and ran. She was a nun of some kind, gathered Roger. The hospice was for children with terminal illnesses. The children went there to die. She was invited by the hostess of the program to select a piece of music to be played. She picked a song from 1985. *Walking In The Air* sung by Aled Jones; a young Welsh lad with the voice of an angel.

A very ill young boy, who the nun had looked after, played *Walking In The Air* over and over. It was his favourite piece of music.

They had played it at his funeral.

Then the music came on. *'We're walking in the air'*

Tears welled up in Roger's eyes. The nun cared so much. Cared so deeply.

Mr Auxiliary slowed the Jaguar as the long black nose of a hearse pulled slowly onto the road ahead of them. The hearse carried a coffin trimmed with shining brass handles.

Two long Limousines followed close behind. There were no flowers with the coffin and no mourners in the Limousines. The procession was on its way to pick up

the family and friends of the corpse in the coffin. Someone's mother or father, sister or brother, daughter or son. Dead meat in a box. An ex-person. A broken computer. Perhaps a young boy. Gone.

Aled Jones' still sang out, '*... Taken by surprise*'

No, thought Roger. That person has not gone. Their life will always be there, embedded in the space-time of this universe. No matter what happens, they have existed. That time, those events, their life, will always have been. No matter what. That will never change.

If one imagined the entire existence of the universe in time as a hard-boiled chicken's egg; the blunt end is the beginning, it expands quickly then starts to diminish to a sharper end. There's a tiny, thin slice through that egg in which I exist, thought Roger. When you stand back and look at the egg, you'll be looking at me too. And every other life that ever existed will be there as well. Immortalised in egg-yolk. All of your deeds and thoughts - and misdeeds - on display for those who can see, to see. To be seen, and perhaps, to be judged. So thinking about our lives as finite and consequence free could be a big, big mistake.

But I have been the cause of people's deaths, thought Roger. If it was not for my actions there would be a good chance that some of those killed the other day would still be alive.

'We're walking in the air'

Just because I didn't actually pull the trigger; does that make me innocent? No. I condoned those actions. I was in a place, a mental place, where no one else's lives

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mattered. People's lives do matter. Whoever they are. We're all embedded in the same universe.

So is it the fear of judgement that's caused me to change my mind? Or the genuine belief that I must live my life such that my selfish activities do not cause distress to others?

Roger searched his mind for the answer. There was nothing. Just the question.

'But did it matter? Yes it did matter.'

The Jaguar was underground and parked. The radio was off. Roger became aware that Mr Auxiliary was staring at him. Roger had voiced the last question and answer out loud.

Chapter 13

Roger stood in front of The Major's desk trying to rock discretely on the balls of his feet. The office was stuffy and he could feel sweat running down his back. He held his hands together in front of his genitals.

'You are well?' asked the Major gesturing for Roger to sit down.

Roger sat, grateful for the chance to take the weight from his legs. The only way to stop them shaking was to rock slightly. A trick he had learned when

lecturing Applied Mechanics at Ealing University. Where had *that* memory come from?

When Roger didn't reply The Major took it upon himself to continue, 'I can understand if you're getting a little, shall we say, impatient. But never fear, arrangements are almost complete.'

Roger hoped his beating heart couldn't be heard in his voice. 'I can't do it,' he said. His dry mouth clicked against his teeth.

A cold stillness descended on The Major and his office. Roger tensed even more making his head dither ever so slightly.

'I don't think The KOPALDA and its philosophy is for me,' said Roger. 'With your permission I'd like to go home, please.'

Piggy eyes stared at Roger for thirty long uncomfortable seconds. This was not good.

'If I had not heard it for myself,' said The Major, 'I would not have believed such naivety existed.'

The Major raised himself from his seat with a grunt. 'Get out!' he bellowed. Roger stood in alarm. 'Get out and do your job before I have you painfully removed from the face of this planet!' White foamy spittle speckled the Major's lips. 'Get Out!'

Roger left hastily on bent legs with his hands slightly ahead of him as if ready to dodge a thrown brick.

That was not good.

*

Roger sat on his hotel bed and picked up the phone. Was it safe? Probably more prudent to use the phones in the

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hotel lobby. Roger replaced the phone, stood, picked his jacket from the chair back and headed out of room. Mr Auxiliary joined him as he stood waiting for the elevator.

The lift doors opened and Roger stood back to let Mr Auxiliary in first. Mr Auxiliary didn't move.

'Very well,' said Roger getting into the lift. He pressed the button marked 'G' for ground floor.

Both men watched the blue number above the doors counting down. Roger couldn't resist a sneak peek at Mr Auxiliary. What must life be like without a tongue? What does he sound like when he speaks? Roger looked quickly back at the numbers when Mr Auxiliary turned as he felt Roger looking at him.

The lift stopped with a gentle bounce and the doors opened with a ping and a sigh. The lobby buzzed with busy people.

'Oh, hang on,' said Roger, as they were heading for the double glass doors which led to the street, 'I just need to make a call.' Roger spun on his heel and made for a row of three white telephones, each with a small privacy hood attached to the wall. He took the first from its cradle.

A steady tone was interrupted by a woman's voice, 'Which number, please?'

'Oh,' Roger had expected a dial-tone. He was reluctant to give up the number. But you've dialled it from your room already, said Roger B. Roger patted his jacket theatrically. 'I'm sorry,' he said into the phone, 'I seem to have misplaced the number.' He hung up.

Mr Auxiliary looked at Roger impassively, framed

large and dark by the bright light coming through the double glass doorway.

Roger walked towards him, continuing the charade. 'I've lost the number,' he said pretending to go thorough his pockets. 'Never mind, I'll call later.'

Over Mr Auxiliary's shoulder, also framed against the bright light, Roger saw a familiar female figure. Good God, it's Julia!

Something in Roger stopped him reacting in front of Mr Auxiliary.

Julia mouthed and motioned Roger to head off to his left. She obviously knew something was amiss and she had to be discrete. Somehow she seemed to know that it would be best if Mr Auxiliary didn't know she was there. Roger glanced to his left and saw the signs to the toilets.

'Back in a sec,' said Roger turning towards the toilets. Mr Auxiliary nodded and started to follow slowly.

Roger headed to the gentlemen's door which was still closing behind someone.

Inside, one of the rows of cubicles was occupied. Roger picked one next to it, entered and closed the door. He pulled out some sheets of paper from the dispenser and wiped the toilet seat before sitting down. On the back of the door was scrawled: 'Kev has a tiny prick' in blue biro. Following straight on, in red scrawl, was, 'of a mate called Lee.' Roger felt a moment of embarrassment at being a man as he wondered what was on the back of Julia's door.

He waited not knowing what to do next.

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A folded piece of paper appeared from under the neighbouring cubicle. Roger took it gingerly. He unfolded it and read, 'fun house', scrawled in thick black crayon or eyeliner. More likely eyeliner. Julia would be more likely to be carrying eyeliner than crayons. Brilliant deduction, thought Roger B.

Roger stood, dropped the paper into the toilet basin and flushed.

Mr Auxiliary stood waiting for him by the basins where Roger washed his hands. His heart was pounding. He felt surprisingly exhilarated.

'It's a beautiful day outside,' said Roger drying his hands. 'I was just going for a stroll along the promenade. Perhaps as far as the pleasure beach?' Mr Auxiliary shrugged noncommittally.

Roger left the hotel and crossed over towards the beach. A green and cream tram was just about to pull away as Roger jumped aboard holding the doors open for Mr Auxiliary.

'It's been a while since I've been on one of these,' said Roger, not expecting and not getting a reply. 'We can walk back.'

A short ride south and Roger and Mr Auxiliary were crossing back across the road towards the huge permanent fun-fare known as the pleasure beach.

'Ah, the pleasure beach,' said Roger. 'Built when "pleasure" meant something.'

Mr Auxiliary frowned.

'Don't worry,' said Roger, 'I don't know what I'm talking about either. I'm just in a ... strange mood. Let's

go and hook some ducks.'

Roger and Mr auxiliary joined the crowds and strolled round the flamboyantly painted stalls and rides. All the while Roger steered them towards the rear of the site where he knew the fun house was situated. Roger headed them into busy sections between candy-floss stores and win-a-goldfish stands. At one point, seeing Mr Auxiliary was occupied negotiating a twin pram tied with balloons, Roger ducked behind a hook-a-duck store and came upon Mr Auxiliary from behind.

Mr Auxiliary was scanning ahead. On tip-toes, trying to locate Roger.

Mr Auxiliary turned to face him as Roger tapped him on the shoulder. 'Fancy a go on the basket ball thing?' Roger asked. His plan was to make Mr Auxiliary feel more comfortable about him being out of sight for short periods.

Mr Auxiliary shook his head. His eyes gave nothing away.

'Suit yourself,' said Roger.

They continued to stroll along the crowded stalls. Roger occasionally asking Mr Auxiliary if he would like to 'have a go'. Confident the answer would always be no.

Roger began to feel impatient. Wanted to meet with Julia, ask about Harry. He headed for a section where the crowd was thickest, crammed with children vying to get into the large fibreglass mouth of a play area in the shape of a blue whale. Roger squeezed past the children, prams, balloons, mothers, fathers, grandmas, and dogs fighting against their leads. It worked. Again.

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Mr Auxiliary was completely distracted, turned right around trying to keep his dark coat away from the oversized lollipops and ice-cream cones brandished by hysterical children.

Roger ducked around a teacup ride and towards where he vaguely remembered the fun house to be located.

He slipped quickly between the crowds only slightly aware of the screams of the riders on the roller coaster clattering above him.

He found himself standing in front of a traditional carousel. An exuberant waltz played by electronic Oompah musicians encouraged him to move forward, come see me, ride on my magnificent gilded geldings. Wide eyed children clung to the garish, yo-yoing horses and scanned the crowds fizzing by for mum, dad, grandma. Look at me. Look at me. Harry would have loved this thing.

A grey haired lady in a full length beige coat guarded an empty pram next to Roger. 'Excuse me,' he said. 'I don't suppose you know where the fun house is, do you?'

'Burned down, love,' she said. 'In ninety one I think.'

'Really?' said Roger. 'That's sad. I used to play in it as a child. Did they build another one somewhere?'

'Don't think so.'

'Thanks.'

Shit. Julia thought there'd be a fun house too. But it burned down years ago. What now? What would Julia

do?

From another ride or store, just under the sound of the carousels' waltz, Roger could just hear Olivia Newton-John singing, *'Let's get physical, physical, I wanna get physical, let's get into physical'*

Good idea. Let's get visible, visible.

Roger headed for the carousel. Shouldn't be a problem, thought Roger, timing his jump so one of the poles was passing right by him. With his left foot on the first step and his right hand grabbing the fast moving pole Roger instantly realised he'd misjudged the whole manoeuvre and the forces exerted on his badly balanced body were just going to be too much.

The carousel shrugged off Roger's advances, patted him effortlessly away and left him sprawled on his back, his head resting on someone's shoe.

'Nice move, Roger,' said Julia looking down at him. She helped him up as children pointed and laughed and adults told them not to be rude while suppressing their grins. 'There's a seat over there.' Julia guided Roger to a plastic bench where they sat down. Well below the level of the crowd, a moving wall of people protected them from prying eyes.

'You look nice,' said Roger sincerely. Julia was a slim, attractive middle-aged lady with grey eyes and flowing dark brown hair. Her expression was serious but tiny creases around her eyes and mouth told of numerous smiles. She wore a cream suit with a plain white blouse. Pale brown tights covered pale, fit legs. A dancer's legs.

Julia took hold of Roger's hand. A moment of

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tenderness made Roger realise he had not had emotional contact with another person since before leaving Julia and Harry. How long had that been now? And how soon Heather, the stocking-top girl, had been forgotten. Not forgotten, just reassigned. The night with Heather, though exquisitely carnal, was, if Roger were truthful, devoid of any sympathetic emotional content. Heather was a great shag. But little else.

The simplicity of holding Julia's hand, the gentle intimacy of contact, made Roger's shoulders visibly relax. He realised he was clenching his teeth, making his jaw hurt. Relax. Deep sigh. Roger just wanted to go home. He felt Julia's hands relax too and he looked into her smiling eyes. Yes, home.

'Let's go home, Roger,' said Julia gently.

'Yes,' he said. Then a thought struck him; 'Harry. Who's looking after Harry?'

Julia's eyes continued to smile. 'Now Roger, don't you worry about that.' The tone was slightly patronising and Roger felt himself tense once more. 'Let's just think about getting home,' said Julia, 'and getting back to normality. We have a lot of work to catch up on.'

'Work?' He supposed he must have a job of some kind. 'What do I do?' he asked.

Julia patted his hand. 'You're obviously very tired, Roger,' she said. 'When we get home we can relax and gently bring it all back, okay?'

Roger tried to look through the memory-door. Swirling, murky darkness. Like a foggy scene from Great Expectations, said Roger C. You don't want to look back

there, said Roger B. Too much trouble.

A small ripple of panic crept up from Roger's stomach. What is it that's so bad? What happened back then? Back then? It wasn't that long ago.

'What did I do?' asked Roger again. 'What did we do?'

Julia sighed. 'Roger ... sit back, relax.'

Roger did as he was told; gripping Julia's hand.

'You are a very talented and important individual, Roger.'

'Important to who?'

'You're important to me, Roger; to your friends, to your colleagues and to your country.'

To my country? 'Am I in the army?'

'Roger, we don't really have time for this. If you could just trust me and come home with me we could work on this together. All will become clear, I promise you.'

This was incredibly frustrating. 'I want to remember.'

'And you will, Roger. You will.' Julia's voice was oh so soothing. A warm, chocolate brown soothing voice.

'I know what you think my talent is. You think I can do complicated maths and decrypt messages really quickly.'

'Yes, Roger. Those are some of your skills, certainly,' said Julia patting Roger's hand.

'But you don't understand. It's not really me. It's a voice in my head.'

'Roger, we shouldn't pursue this right now. We

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need to get you home as quickly as possible.'

'No! I need to remember. I need to tell you something.'

Julia sat back, dropping Roger's hand. 'Very well, Roger. Tell me.'

'The problems, the pictures and symbols, the answers all come to me from a voice in my head. From voices in my head. It's not me. It's as if I have a radio in my head that someone can use to talk to me. And they must be able to listen to and see what I see and hear, too.'

'Roger ...' Julia tried to interrupt him.

'No, wait, there's something else. When I need help or guidance or need to know where something is I talk to ... a girl. I talk to her with a ... thing ... like a hands free telephone. You know; with a speaker in your ear? And sometimes I visit her somehow.'

Julia nodded. 'Jennifer.'

'Yes,' said Roger in shocked surprise. 'How did you know that?'

'Jennifer helps you with some of the more complicated problems, too, Roger.'

'Yes.'

'In fact, Roger, if Jennifer is not available, for whatever reason, you can't ... perform.'

'No.' Roger tried to remember Jennifer more clearly.

'I'm going to sound like a broken record, Roger, but we really should be going.'

'Tell me what I did. I need to know.'

'Very well, Roger, very briefly. Then you must

promise me that we should go. Okay?"

Roger nodded.

Julia took a deep breath. 'Roger, you work for the government. We, work for the government. We work on ... projects which are deemed very sensitive and so need the highest level of security in areas relating to communications.'

'I'm a code breaker.'

'More than that Roger. You build codes which only you and a supercomputer given a hundred years can break.'

'Sounds a bit silly. All eggs in one basket silly. If anything happened to me there could be messages and communications that couldn't be interpreted.'

'Which is why we want to take such good care of you, Roger.'

'We?'

'Yes, Roger. Me, as your partner and the government as your employer.'

'You said maths and cryptography where just part of my talents? What others are there?'

Something suddenly changed. Roger and Julia's private huddle was no more. They looked up at two figures, their stillness stark against the milling crowd.

Mr Auxiliary, inches from Roger, had the stance of a gun-fighter. He mirrored the stance of a man in a light brown suit standing opposite Julia.

Roger thought they looked mildly comic standing there like a couple of spaghetti-western gunslingers.

The crowds squeezed past, not touching.

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Oblivious.

Nothing changed but suddenly Roger was frightened. We've been rumbled, said Roger B. Run! said Roger C.

Roger stood, quickly. Julia stood too and grabbed his arm. Mr Auxiliary grabbed his other arm. Mr A narrowed his eyes.

Oh, shit.

From nowhere, it seemed to Roger, the two Misters had knives. Large, lethal, dark bladed knives. And they were fighting. Knocking people out of the way. Thrusting and parrying. Spinning and ducking, silent and emotionless. Women with children screamed, girls on the roller-coaster screamed.

Julia was pulling at his arm. 'Roger. Come quickly,' she said.

Roger resisted. 'No, I can't. They've threatened to kill me and Harry if I don't do what they want.'

Julia tugged at Roger's arm. 'Snap out of it, Roger!'

Mr Auxiliary tripped over a child, rolled and was on his feet again in one easy motion.

'See, Roger,' said Julia, 'your man's being taken care of. We can protect you. Come with me, now.'

Roger watched as the two men once more came together in their deadly dance. He pulled his arm away from Julia. 'I can't,' he said. 'This was a mistake.'

'Roger!' Julia snapped. 'Come now or they will hunt you down and you will go to gaol and you will have no light, no books, no Harry, no contact, nothing. Come now or you will rot in gaol!'

Roger looked at Julia, tears in his eyes, a pain behind his sternum. 'No,' he said.

And Julia knew Roger meant it. She looked at her man fighting with Mr Auxiliary, and back at Roger. She jumped at Roger grabbing him in a bear hug. Locking her fingers behind him.

Roger stood, hands in the air, unable to walk but with Julia's small firm breasts pushing into his stomach.

Jeez.

Somebody in the crowd shouted, 'My God. Call an ambulance someone. Stop them.' Men held their arms up to hold back and protect the people. But no-one stepped forward.

Mr Auxiliary's opposite number was lying on the floor, his right hand tried to stay gouts of blood pumping from a severe neck wound, his left hand gripped Mr Auxiliary's ankle. Mr Auxiliary lifted his left arm, pulled back the dark sleeve and looked at a six inch gash in his forearm. He pulled the torn sleeve back down in disgust then stamped hard with his heel on his stricken opponent's arm bending it unnaturally. Someone in the crowd screamed. From the agonised expression on Mr A's face the arm was broken.

Mr Auxiliary turned to Julia clamped around Roger. A lightening fast punch to the back of her neck and she collapsed around Roger's feet.

Mr Auxiliary's irresistible grip settled around Roger's upper arm and they left the pleasure beach quickly and without hindrance.

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Mr Auxiliary left blood on the hand-rail of the tram they caught back to the Sea View Hotel.

On the ninth floor they entered an unmarked room. It was virtually identical to The Major's office in the underground complex.

Cigar smoke filled the air.

You're not a happy bunny, are you, thought Roger B as Mr Auxiliary pushed him in front of the Major's desk. Shut up!

The Major leaned back in his leather chair. His bulbous belly aimed at Roger. His fingers steepled, white around the nails and shaking ever so slightly. The pin-striped material in the upper arm of his suit bulged as his biceps strained to push his palms together. The Major's eyes were horizontal slits. His mouth a horizontal lipless line.

Why was The Major was cross? How had he known about Mr Auxiliary's fracas when Mr Auxiliary had not communicated, certainly not verbally anyway, during the ride back to the hotel? There must be other eyes watching Roger. Watching Mr Auxiliary too.

'Very disappointed, Mr Peerson,' said The Major. Roger flinched at the noise. The Major didn't inhale, there was no warning. He went from silence to speaking instantly. 'You force me to demonstrate how seriously I take your full cooperation.'

A familiar voice behind Roger made him turn. 'Hey killer.' Lenny Ludhoe with his dust-bunny hair. The thug from the pub stood next to him. The thug who had shot the mock-blond during the struggle in the pub was

winking at him.

Shock froze Roger.

The thug had a gun with a silencer attached. It looked way too sophisticated for him to be wielding. He pointed it at Roger then swung it quickly away so it was pointing at Mr Auxiliary.

Phuck.

A small black hole appeared in Mr Auxiliary's throat instantly followed by a plume of blood and flesh hitting the wall behind him. Roger could see in Mr Auxiliary's eyes that he knew. For a full two seconds the horror in Mr Auxiliary's eyes said, I've been shot in the throat and I am now going to die. And he did. Falling backwards, the upper part of his body crashing against the wall and smearing more blood in its wake.

Roger remained frozen. A thought from Roger B filled his brain: I am *not* going to die like this.

Roger B took over, forcing him to dropped to his knees. 'Please don't kill me,' his voice said. He leaned forward and grabbed the thug's leg.

The thug raised his arms looking at Roger with disgust, 'Get the fuck off me,' he spat.

Roger brought one foot up from the kneeling position, pushed hard, swinging his right arm up between the thug's legs. Roger felt the alien softness give under the force of his forearm. The thug jack-knifed in agony. Roger's head continued up, the back of his head connecting with the rapidly descending face. It hurt like hell but Roger knew he'd broken the thug's noise. Now standing upright, Roger grabbed the thug's gun hand and

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forced his wrist round. Roger B marvelled at how easy this was. This murdering bastard was going to pay. Roger forced the silencer into the thug's mouth snapping the thug's front teeth off at the gums in the process. He looked into the thug's watering eyes for a heartbeat and, with his thumb placed on the thug's index finger, forced him to pull the trigger.

The back of the thug's head mixed with Mr Auxiliary's remains. Roger held on to the gun as the thug fell from his grip.

This was easy-peasy. This feels good.

The Major ducked behind his desk and Roger fired twice into the leather desk pad. Phuck, phuck.

Roger spun round in time to see Lenny duck out of the hotel room door. Roger followed him out into the corridor. Lenny was out of sight but shouting for help.

Roger headed for a door marked 'Stairwell'.

He headed down the stairs two at a time. Shots thudded into the wall and floor around him. A familiar chuck chuck chuck. Roger fired over his shoulder. Phuck. A gasp followed by something heavy hitting something hard. That was lucky! Keep going, keep going. Used to go down stairs fast like this as a kid. Two steps at a time. On the edge of disaster. No problem. Unless you get your heel caught on a step then your foot is forced forwards and you run the risk of tearing the tendons on the front of your foot. What is that bit called where the front of your foot meets your shin? Concentrate! Two steps, two steps, round a bend, two steps, two steps, round a bend. Total concentration. Don't stop. Keep going. Jesus, Jesus. Woa!

Can't go down any further. Roger crashed through a fire exit and found himself tripping and stumbling over rubbish bins and squishy, foul smelling black plastic bags. He was in a narrow alleyway; behind him a brick wall; ahead was light coming through narrow, black, wrought-iron gates. He had dropped the gun. Somewhere in the stinking heap of black bags. No matter. Roger's lungs were hurting and gasping and the fetid smells were making him feel sick. He threw his shoulder against the iron gates. They yielded noisily and Roger careered onto the street where people averted their gaze, exaggerating their squint against the evening sun and hurried their progress.

Roger stopped, took a deep breath, turned away from the hotel and, leading with his left shoulder, made his way quickly through the late rush-hour crowds. His heart raced, the sick feeling from the smell of the alleyway was fading.

What the hell had just happened?

That was great!

People are trying to kill me! Who is that over by the car! Who is that turning to look at me by the shop window! All these people! Who are they! Which of them wants me dead!

Roger was getting his breath back. Over to you, said Roger B.

Panic immediately started to win and Roger could feel his brain; feel the fear as dark streaks sliding and darting just under the surface of the undulations of the grey matter. Roger held his head in his hands his body

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paralysed. Roger B laughed. Roger C screamed.

Roger's conscious mind switched off. He stood still, lowered his hands, serene as Buddha, half smiling at the evening sun. His unconscious had taken complete control, was keeping him safe, like when it took over the driving while his thoughts fantasized and flew.

Body relaxed. Shoulders down. Easy breathing.

When he was calm again Roger found he was looking at his own reflection in a shop window.

He noticed a figure squatting against a wall, broom handle legs folded impossibly tight, a dark cowl of dreadlocks, ancient boots.

Looks so thin. Mr Thin, you look worn out.

Roger patted his pockets, looking for change.

Mr Thin wore a denim shirt opened to show necklaces of dark beads, black string, silver chains. A grey-streaked beard fused into his gaunt face. Quick green eyes. Tattoos testified to a previous life. A previous time. A time of colour, a little money, a future. He fiddled with his sleeves. Mumbled into his chest. Directly in front of his boots sat a clay bowl placed on white card. Bright white, reflecting the sun, leaving spots when Roger looked away.

Mr Thin's inner right forearm flashed a silver, red and blue dagger coiled about by a green and yellow serpent. Colours dimmed by dirt and time.

Hints of dark blue whorls and words poked from under sleeves and torn trouser. The left arm, inner forearm, Roger stepped forward, cocked his head, hard to read Gothic script, KOPALDA.

Roger staggered back into the path of a young woman explaining why she was late – 'the bloody train was cancelled again' - into her mobile phone. Her elbow caught him in the ribs, her phone smashed into three pieces on the concrete paving.

Battery, phone body, battery cover.

'Fuck!' The woman stopped, stood feet together, heavy chested body tilted forward at the waist, hands held as if she had just let go of a tray of hors d'oeuvres.

Battery, phone body, battery cover.

'Sorry!' Roger stooped to retrieve the battery. 'Let me.' The phone.

The battery cover lay touching the cardboard plinth of the begging bowl.

'I was on the phone?'

Up-speak. So irritating. 'Sorry. Yes.' Roger handed her the two pieces. She pointed at the remaining part. Eyebrows raised.

'Excuse me, I just ...' said Roger. He reached for the last piece, met the quick green gaze.

'Nice tits,' whispered Mr Thin.

Alcohol smell.

'What?'

It was coming back. The alcohol smell. Tits? No, crudeness. Roger's neurons itched with memories just out of reach. The Salvation Army. That was it. Lenny. Lenny, sat opposite on a creaking single bed in a beamed hall crammed with other single beds. Lenny had just sloshed booze into his plastic cup and missed, laughing at his own unfunny crude joke.

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Roger straightened up holding the final piece of the phone.

The tattoo. KOPALDA. Oh, God. He'd made a terrible mistake. They would find Harry. Hurt him. He had to get back, take his chances, find a way.

Roger thrust the battery cover into the woman's hands and ran.

Harry's life depended on it.

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Roger stood getting his breath back on the other side of the road opposite the entrance to The Sea View Hotel. Ordinary people passed by on the pavement, entered and left the hotel. Four men stood among them, watching him like sated lions idly watching an impala.

On some unheard command, the goons relaxed further. The inner two turned to face each other. A clear invitation for Roger to enter the hotel.

Roger jogged over the road, between the two goons and into the hotel. Lenny Ludhoe was waiting for him in the lobby.

'Now then, killer,' said Lenny.

'Which room?'

'This way, sir.'

Roger followed Lenny into an empty lift. Lenny punched nine and Roger kept his teeth clamped as Lenny counted the number of each floor they passed.

'Nine oh one,' said Lenny as the lift door slid open. 'To the left.'

A dark suited man stood outside 901. He patted Roger down and, when satisfied Roger was weapon free

opened the door for him.

The bodies had been removed but the mess remained. The Major sat back from his desk, his fingers steepled, two splintered holes in the surface of the desk stared accusingly at Roger.

Roger apologised for his actions. For killing the thug who shot Mr Auxiliary. It was the stress of the sudden shooting of Mr Auxiliary, who he was just getting to know, that had, temporarily, pushed him over the edge. It was like a side effect. One of the prices he paid for his savant talents. In exchange for incredible mathematical prowess and a, mostly, normal personality he reacted badly to stress. His personality tended to fracture at times of great stress or when he thought he was in great danger. It wouldn't happen again. Or if it did Roger promised to do his best to keep it under control.

The Major watched Roger impassively as he grovelled his apology.

When Roger had finished, The Major stood and looked at Lenny. 'He's in your care,' he said.

'My pleasure,' said Lenny, taking Roger's arm.

Roger shrugged off Lenny's grip with ease making Lenny stagger slightly with surprise.

The Major narrowed his eyes at Roger. There was a new stillness about Roger which caused The Major to swallow some words.

The Major dismissed them with a wave and sat down ostensibly turning his mind to other business.

Lenny stood back to let Roger pass.

Chapter 14

Jennifer stood looking in the mirror. Who said: 'Speak so I can see you'? Or was it: 'Speak, so that through your words I may know you'? Something like that.

She turned and looked at the door through which Roger had just left. Roger was scared but in control. He hadn't come to ask her for anything, he had come to ask her to do something. Asking her without framing the question but by painting the picture. Roger had gripped her shoulders and, through his arms and hands, willed the meaning and importance of his words into her. There was no breath or spittle or smell, just his intense unblinking gaze and his voice and his hot grip.

It wasn't supposed to work like this. Jennifer was a part of Roger. One of the group that was Roger. It wasn't supposed to be like this. If I know I'm not real how am I to survive? If I know I'm all in someone else's head how am I to continue? How can I be in Roger's head with a part of me listening to Roger and another part of me thinking things like this? How is it possible for me to be alone? Roger is asking my help and breaking the rules. The rules clearly state ... no, of course, there are no rules.

Jennifer agreed with Roger. If Harry was to survive they had to use a different pallet. Paint a new

picture.

Chapter 15

Lenny sat on the smaller, less comfortable seat in the back of the London black cab. He was forced to brace himself at every corner. Roger, sat next to Meadhill on the larger rear seat, smiled slightly at this tiniest of victories and for the third time since boarding the cab checked his pocket for the hard form of the USB memory stick he'd prepared the previous day.

The taxi stopped on Pall Mall, outside the pale stone monolith that was the Institute of Directors.

They wore dark suits, white shirts and dark ties.

In stealth mode, thought Roger as they entered through the mahogany and glass double doors.

While other members were made to insert their membership cards into a slot where a green light assured the doorman the card, at least, was genuine, Meadhill, Lenny and Roger were waved through, up a short flight of stairs passed signs to 'the morning room', 'director's lounge', across a marbled tiled floor, passed enormous gilt framed paintings of old men in elaborate uniforms, to a palatial thick carpeted ornate stairway. More gilt framed paintings of generals, admirals, knights of the

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garter. Conquerors and defenders of the colonies. Heroic midwives slapping the reluctant arse of baby commerce.

So much guilt.

Meadhill took the shallow stairs two at a time. Roger tried them one at a time but the stairs were too shallow. Two at a time felt right. Lenny followed.

In a red carpeted hallway with a high ceiling another polished wooden door. Meadhill pointed at the floor indicating he and Lenny should wait.

Meadhill knocked and entered the room closing the door behind him.

Roger sneezed.

'It's the fucking dust,' said Lenny, keeping his voice low. 'Dust made from old men's skin.'

'Why are we here?' asked Roger in a hoarse whisper.

'Fuck knows,' said Lenny. 'I've just got to make sure you don't throw another fucking fit, like.'

'If I do, you'll be the first to know,' said Roger. He could see from his expression that Lenny found himself inexplicably intimidated but trying to hide it. 'You should be scared,' said Roger just for the hell of it.

'Pha!' snorted Lenny.

Roger liked this new feeling. Being intimidating is a state of mind. Fascinating.

Meadhill came back through the door carrying a large brown envelope. Roger glimpsed a meeting room of dark polished tables, leather captain's chairs and more guilt.

They left the Institute of Directors and got into the

same cab they had arrived in.

'Why couldn't we have just waited in the cab?' said Roger.

'Just in case,' said Meadhill.

'Just in case what?' asked Roger.

'Just ... just in case,' said Meadhill. Lenny smirked.

They're worried about me, thought Roger. Worried I'll run again or 'flip out'.

Funny.

The driver set off, already knowing the destination.

The cab soon stopped due to heavy traffic and Roger watched a small piece of pavement through his window. A constant stream of people walked across that one small patch. All types of adults; smartly dressed, casual, destitute, tourists. Occasionally there would be a gap. No more people? Then they'd be there again. From the left, from the right, from the right, from the right, from the left. Non-stop. People, people, people.

'Where are we going?' asked Roger pulling away from the window.

'Downing Street,' said Meadhill.

Roger snorted not believing him. Meadhill's expression said believe it.

The cab started again and made its staccato way through the mid-day traffic eventually stopping on Whitehall opposite Downing Street.

Bloody hell, thought Roger, it really is Downing Street.

Grey metal fencing held back a thin scattering of tourists. On the inside of the barriers, uniformed Police

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strolled and rocked on their great cliché feet.

Meadhill called a Bobby over, took out a sheet of paper from the brown envelope he'd collected at the Institute of Directors and showed it to him.

The Bobby nodded as he read the sheet, handed it back to Meadhill with a small salute and gestured to his left. 'Over there, sir,' he said indicating a small gap in the barriers.

Meadhill, Roger and Lenny walked in single file through the gap and along Downing Street passed number ten, number eleven and on to number twelve. The last door on the corner. Twelve Downing Street. Among other things, home of the Head of the Strategic Communications Unit. Flashbulbs went off. The tourists are taking pictures of us, thought Roger. How bizarre.

Meadhill banged on number twelve with the side of his fist. Policemen on either side mumbled into their lapels.

The black door opened and a small ferret of a man, not wearing his suit jacket, raised his eyebrows and twitched his moustache at Meadhill who silently handed him the piece of paper. The man stopped twitching for a moment as he read.

Hanging on to the paper, Mr Ferret stood back allowing the three men in and closed the door behind them. Roger felt his skin prickle as the cool air outside was replaced by the air-conditioned fug inside number twelve.

Mr Ferret lead them into a green and cream waiting area where they were shown a coffee pot and

some soft leather chairs.

'H-help yourself,' he said, nervously. 'I-I'll be right back.' He backed out of the room.

Four CCTV cameras, one high in each corner, whirred gently as their operators scanned the three men.

Roger looked at a clock mounted on the wall opposite and thought there was something wrong with it. Then it ticked. The second hand moved. All hands had, for one suspended second, been melded into one, all pointing at the twelve. Noon exactly.

The second hand ticked exactly one hundred and twenty times before a Mr Ferret look-alike appeared. He was a little older than Mr Ferret, wore his suit jacket and was perspiring heavily. His moustache and the hair on his forehead was wet. Roger recognised him from photographs presented at the previous day's briefing. This was one of three personal aids to the Head of the Strategic Communications Unit herself.

'This way gentlemen,' he said like a bad actor, only gesturing when he'd finished speaking. He led the way out of the waiting area, up a narrow beige and cream staircase and into what, Roger assumed to be, his office. Meadhill closed the door behind them.

'It's logged in,' said Mr Ferret Senior indicating a computer on his desk. He then turned and looked silently out of the window to Downing Street below.

Meadhill looked at Roger meaningfully. Roger took his cue and sat at the keyboard. The terminal had direct access to the Level 9, secret MoD network. Roger could also access the small programs –he'd christened

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them Roger's Renegades – sprinkled throughout the network running under Admiralty Arch and most of central London. Roger inserted the USB memory stick into a spare port and uploaded a small program to the super secure network. A program which spawned more Renegades into the network. These Renegades had a special feature, by manipulating switches and computer ports they could set up slight variations in the frequency across the power lines feeding the networks through the national grid. By varying the frequencies the Renegades could send and listen for messages to and from each other across networks that may not be directly connected but which drew their power from the national grid system. In this way – as well as squirting data down A/C power lines when the voltage neared zero - messages, information, anything could be sent from one secure network to another seemingly unconnected network.

Roger waited for confirmation that his 'renegades' were operating properly. He needed five messages from the terminal to be sure.

RR: OK

That's the first one, thought Roger. Could have been a little more imaginative with the message, he supposed. He looked up: Lenny stood by the door; Meadhill paced quietly up and down; Mr Ferret Senior looked resolutely out of the window onto Downing Street below. Concentrating on his task, Roger hadn't realised just how quiet it was, how the fuggy atmosphere was frozen with tension. Lenny kept swallowing, kept looking at Roger and then at the door as tiny noises came from

the other side. Meadhill looked calm but his hands were mottled red and white, fiercely gripping each other behind his back. Mr Ferret Senior; his neck and sideburns looked very damp. Sweating for England. I'm the most relaxed one in the room, thought Roger.

RR: OK

Two down, three to go.

A noise outside in the corridor, Lenny reacted instinctively by raising his hand towards it. The door quickly burst open banging Lenny on the back of his arm.

A grey suited man holding an open file entered purposefully. 'Trentbridge, do you know anything ... Oh, I'm sorry.'

'No problem,' said Lenny rubbing his arm. 'My fault.'

Meadhill froze. Mr Ferret senior spun on his heel to face the newcomer who closed the brown card file and looked from Lenny to Meadhill.

After a moment the newcomer said, 'Sorry, Trentbridge. Didn't realize you were busy.' He noticed Roger sat at the terminal and frowned lightly.

A breathless second of silence.

Meadhill cleared his throat.

So Mr Ferret Senior was really called Trentbridge, thought Roger. He looked at Trentbridge who looked back at him stupidly, mouth agape. Roger raised his eyebrows in a silent, 'Well? Say something, knob-head!'

Trentbridge's mouth puckered up. Nothing emerged. His face began turning red. A movement caught his eye, Meadhill was reaching inside his jacket. Lenny

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was quietly closing the door behind the newcomer.

'Password!' The word was an Exocet missile launched by Trentbridge at the newcomer.

'What?'

'There's a problem.' Trentbridge took a deep breath.

RR: OK.

Just two to go.

'There's a problem with one of the passwords into my user area,' said Trentbridge.

The newcomer looked from Meadhill to Roger. 'Couldn't Phil sort that out for you?' he asked. 'I'm sure he's just ...'

'Phil doesn't have clearance.' Trentbridge held the newcomer's eye, his expression defying the man to contradict him.

The newcomer looked puzzled. Then tried to look as if he understood. 'Oh,' he said. 'I expect ...' He stepped back towards the door stumbling into Lenny.

'Oh, sorry. Again.'

'No problem,' said Lenny.

Meadhill took a step forward. Sucked through his teeth.

RR: OK.

Jesus, that lunatic's going to ...

'Nearly done.' Roger blurted out the words. Meadhill stopped. 'Just one more check to make sure and we'll be out of your hair.'

Meadhill relaxed. Stood aside, gestured for the newcomer to approach Trentbridge.

The newcomer moved towards Trentbridge

uncertainly. He opened the folder. 'I was just wondering if you'd seen this before.' Handed the folder to Trentbridge.

'Oh yes, this is old hat.' Trentbridge closed the folder with a snap. 'Was superseded in the nineties by article nineteen. Should have been archived years ago. Must have been missed.'

'Right,' said the newcomer. 'Thought it must be something like that.'

Silence for a long heartbeat. A second heartbeat.

RR: OK.

'Done,' said Roger. 'Should be fine now.' He stood and moved towards the door then paused.

Lenny opened the door and the group stood silent until the newcomer realised it was his cue to leave.

'Right,' he said heading out of the door.

Trentbridge turned back to look out of the window onto Downing street. A slack, sad figure.

Now Roger had finished his work The KOPALDA could listen to any electronic message of any kind sent by any organisation in the UK. And Roger's renegades could spread. Across the World's networks, if he allowed it. And they could be electronic mimics. By listening to encryption keys, passwords and data signatures, they could be anyone talking electronically to anyone else.

Trentbridge straightened himself up then turned and led them out of his office, back down the narrow stairway, along the passage and out into Downing Street.

Cameras flashed and Roger could not resist waving to the photographers who quickly realised he was no one

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and turned away.

*

The next day, Trentbridge was found hanging from beneath Blackfriars Bridge. A note in his pocket said: Sorry.

Chapter 16

Roger stood looking out of his hotel window thinking how lucky he was. From the sixth floor of the Tower Thistle hotel he looked down at the motor yachts moored in St Katherine's Dock. When he'd realised which hotel he was to be in he'd hoped for a room with a view of Tower Bridge. But this was better. The stuff of fantasies. Imagine owning and travelling around the world in one of these ladies. One magnificent dame could have fit several London buses on her deck and even had tinted windows so the plebs on the dock walking by couldn't see in.

Roger watched a very ordinary looking couple - he wore shorts and a tea-shirt and pushed a stroller with a toddler, she was laden with shopping bags – get on board and disappear inside. Who were those people and why can't I have one? Only mine would have more chrome and some kind of flag with a yet to be designed family crest on it.

Roger's reveries were interrupted by the flushing of the toilet.

'You still there?' said Lenny from the bathroom. When Roger failed to answer Lenny dashed into the room still doing up his zip. Seeing Roger looking at him with some amusement, Lenny nodded and returned to the bathroom to wash his hands.

Lenny's mobile phone, lying on a mahogany side-table, started to play the theme tune from Mission Impossible.

Damn, thought Roger, that will be in my head all day now. Duurm duurm dum dum duurm duurm dum dum duurm duurm dum dum ...

Lenny jogged back from the bathroom and flipped the mobile to his ear. 'Boss?' he said.

Roger turned back to the view. The shit should be hitting the fan about now, he thought.

From Roger's vantage point, six floors up, the dark green water of St Katherine's Dock was mirror smooth. The typical white sky over London bleached the colours of boats, buildings and people. A huge luxury motor cruiser was moored to his right. A row of bright white motor and sailing boats was moored to his left breaking up the reflection of a milk chocolate brown row of shops and apartments.

Lenny mumbled into his mobile. Roger tuned him out.

A ripple in the water's surface caught Roger's eye and he noticed some wooden jetties had been placed so they sloped gently into the water. A pair of swans was

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nesting on one jetty, seemingly oblivious to the city around them. On the other side of the dock moor hens had similarly built a nest. Tourists ambled over bridges and sipped expensive coffee just a few yards from the birds. Amazing how wild creatures will set up home in what would appear to be the most alien of spaces. The wild birds had successfully tuned out humanity, mated, nested and reared young. Was this a glimpse of the future? Humanity spread across the globe like mould in a Petri dish; all other life reduced to living on small island rectangles of converted trees.

'Yes, he's here.' Lenny's words cut through Roger's thoughts.

Lenny had moved to the hotel door and opened it. Outside, in the hallway, stood a dark suited goon at least six feet four with shoulders the size of Madagascar. He turned his shaven head as Lenny spoke and Roger saw he had an ear-piece with a curly black flex disappearing under his collar.

Lenny swung the door shut as the goon clamped dead eyes on Roger.

Roger shivered theatrically. 'Who's that?' he asked.

Lenny ignored Roger and continued to listen to his mobile.

Roger watched as Lenny's annoying smirk was replaced by – what would you call that? Worry? No. Surprise? No. Seriousness. Lenny was suddenly very serious. He looked at Roger and immediately averted his eyes pushing the mobile closer to his ear.

Roger turned back to the view. A familiar unease

settled over him. Hands in pockets or hands out of pockets? Above the hotel, a small patch of cloud opened and a beam of bright sunlight javelined down to hit the flat, dark water in the centre of St Katherine's Dock. Illuminating nothing. A galaxy, a sun, a planet and a weather system had colluded for billions of years to produce an event that seemed pointless. But where was it written that everything had to have a point?

Something was tugging at Roger. Lenny was pulling his arm up. Momentarily confused Roger watched as Lenny snapped a cold steel handcuff around his right wrist.

'What ...?'

Lenny manoeuvred Roger back towards the double bed. 'Sit,' said Lenny and as soon as Roger sat on the bed Lenny snapped the other side of the handcuff around the leg of the bedside table.

'I can just slide that off the bottom,' said Roger.

Lenny looked down at the table. 'Oh, fuck, yeah.'

'We could move the chair next to the radiator under the window and then attach me to that,' said Roger.

'Okay,' said Lenny and then did just that.

When Roger was safely, and comfortably, attached to the radiator, Lenny sat on the bed and pulled out a cigarette.

'It's a non-smoking room,' said Roger.

'So fucking what,' said Lenny.

Roger shook his head. 'Before I ask why I've been shackled in this inhuman way,' said Roger, 'I must ask you something.'

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'What's that,' asked Lenny.

'Can I go to the toilet, please?' said Roger.

'Are you taking the fucking piss?'

'I'll be making the fucking piss, excuse my French, if you don't let me go to the loo,' said Roger.

'Go on then,' said Lenny, challenging Roger to do as he threatened.

With no hesitation, Roger stood as straight as his handcuffed arm would allow him, pointed his groin towards the centre of the room and pulled down his zip.

'All right, all right, keep your pants on,' said Lenny moving to unlock the handcuff. 'Promise you won't try anything fucking stupid.'

'I promise,' said Roger.

Lenny unlocked the handcuff and Roger went into the bathroom leaving the door open. Normally Roger would have found it extremely difficult to pee under those circumstances but for some reason, today, it was easy.

'So why am I suddenly being treated like an American litter-bug?' Roger shouted over his shoulder and the satisfyingly loud sound of his stream hitting the toilet water.

'What?'

'Why am I being shackled?'

'You've been a naughty fucking lad, haven't you,' said Lenny.

'Naughty?'

'Well according to his lordship, you've somehow sent him an email saying his credit card details will be all

over several kiddie-porn sites by this after-fucking-noon if you don't get your way. Is that right?' said Lenny, standing outside the bathroom door but not looking in.

'That's some of it,' said Roger, shaking his penis. He zipped up, rinsed his hands under the cold tap, dried his hands on a very white hotel towel and palmed a small cardboard sewing kit container. Compliments of Thistle Hotels.

'Some of it?' said Lenny, leading Roger back to the chair and handcuffing him back onto the radiator.

'Nice view, isn't it,' said Roger looking out of the window.

'Come on, killer, what else have you been up to?'

'Not much. Just that and I may have transferred some cash to and from some very incriminating bank accounts,' said Roger holding Lenny's eyes.

'Incriminating? How?'

'Leonard Arthur Victor. LAV.'

Lenny narrowed his eyes at Roger. 'How'd you fucking know that?' he said.

'It's what I do,' said Roger enjoying Lenny's discomfort.

'Don't make me kill you.'

'Now that could possibly be the stupidest thing you could do,' said Roger hoping his voice didn't betray the nerves and fluttering he felt in his stomach. 'If certain things don't happen in the next two hours.' Roger spoke quickly.

Lenny looked dangerous. Maybe he'd gone too far. The people at the top would think about the consequences

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but Lenny was a little more ... emotional.

'If I don't get to do my thing a lot of e-shit is going to hit a lot of e-fans,' said Roger. 'Emails, money transfers, credit card transactions, bank accounts emptied, bank accounts filled, nice clear audit trails, impossible to fake evidence that's as good as, some say better than, finger prints on a smoking gun.'

Lenny reddened. Took a deep breath. 'You're bluffing,' he said.

Roger also took a deep breath. 'Leonard Arthur Victor, born Feb 6th 1961. National Insurance Number W003498. A debit card and two credit cards held with The Royal Bank of Wales. FitBoySin at cool-mail dot com. That last one should really impress the arse off you.'

Lenny put on his serious calm face. 'If you -' Lenny was interrupted by the big goon, who had been standing outside, breaking open the door with his back. Splinters flew across the bed as he crashed to the floor, dead before he hit it. A gaping hole in his chest. The noise of the shotgun blast followed the flying body into the room making Roger's ears sing and giving him an instant headache. Lenny had dived behind the bed and was shooting through the jagged opening where the door had once been.

Panic rose in Roger and his mind fractured. Roger B calmly took over, whistling the theme tune from Mission Impossible as he opened the sewing kit, pulled out a safety pin and pushed it under the clasp on the handcuff which sprang open enough for him to pull his hand free.

Lenny still lay behind the bed, his gun hand raised and firing blindly through the doorway. The odd black suited figure jumped in front of the hole and fired a shot at the bed. Roger B thought, sod this and picked up the chair he had been sitting on and hurled it at the window. With an immensely satisfying crash the window shattered, instantly lowering the temperature in the room and letting in the smells of St Katherine's Dock and its fetid water six stories below.

Roger took a step back, leapt onto the windowsill and hurled himself through the opening. A single thought went through Roger's fractured minds: Keep your feet together, sunbeam.

Roger looked at the sky, raised his arms. Make like a shuttlecock and I should stay upright. The descent took an age before he plunged feet first into the filthy cold water. It was deep enough! But Roger had been holding his breath from the moment he left the window and swimming upwards fully dressed was using a lot of energy. A calm descended on Roger as he thought that he wasn't going to make it. He was going to drown. Then he broke the surface, filled his lungs, coughed and set off for the dockside. The water dragged at his suit and brogues making progress agonisingly slow.

Helping hands pulled Roger from the water. A sharp pain in his right buttock and the world went black.

Chapter 17

Roger woke slowly. He was lying on his side in a very comfortable bed. His head was under the covers. Roger moved a leg to scratch his knee. He recognised the mattress. He was on one of those mattresses that have a layer of foam which holds the shape of your body for a short while after the weight's been lifted. What do they call that stuff? It's not cheap. Roger had a mattress like that at home. He was home. It was all a hideous dream! Harry? Harry will probably still be asleep in his bunk bed. Or he may have sneaked out of bed and be downstairs watching Yu-Gi-Oh.

An itch. Roger's knee was inaccessible. There was material in the way. He was wearing pyjamas. Roger didn't wear pyjamas. Preferred to sleep naked. He wasn't in his bed.

Roger pulled down the quilt and sat up. He was in a small room – barely big enough for the double bed. It was daylight outside. Roger could see the light round the closed curtains. His right buttock was sore. It wasn't a dream. He had left Harry, he had killed the girl, he had planted those software Trojans, he had jumped out of a sixth floor window.

That jump was amazing. Very Tom Cruise. Next time, though, he'd breath on the way down.

The Trojans. Shit, what time was it? If they've timed out and fired off the emails his bargaining power

will be down to zero. Roger looked at his left wrist. No watch.

He slid his legs over the side of the bed. Nausea and dizziness slowed him. He stood gingerly and looked through the curtains. Squinted against the glare. A scruffy back-garden came into focus. It was the same bright grey sky as earlier. A door opened behind him.

'Good, you're awake.'

Roger recognised Julia's voice. 'What time is it?' he asked.

'Half past two,' said Julia.

'Okay,' said Roger. 'We have until five. Why am I wearing pyjamas?'

'Don't you remember, Batman?' said Julia dryly. 'You got wet.'

'Yes,' said Roger rubbing his head, 'jumping in the water will do that to you.'

'This way,' said Julia.

Roger followed Julia downstairs into the back room of what seemed to be a typical three-bedroomed semidetached house. Fitted beige carpets throughout, with neutral colours on all the walls. Roger felt like he'd dropped into the end of an episode of House Doctor. What would have been the dining room had been extended and the extension held a desk, chairs and a couch.

Julia sat down on one of the chairs in front of the desk. 'Sit on the couch,' she said. 'Please.'

Roger, still full of sleep and drugs, did as he was told.

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'I take it,' said Julia, 'that the five o'clock deadline refers to the emails you - or your Trojans or whatever you call those programs of yours – sent me?'

'That's right,' said Roger. 'The deal is simple. Bring Harry to me, keep us safe and happy and I'll reset my little chums every month. Otherwise ...' Roger let the word hang in the air but it didn't sound as good as when the characters on television did it.

Julia steepled her fingers and looked at Roger.

'You're having trouble with your memory,' she said. It wasn't a question. 'I can help you.'

Somehow Roger knew Julia could help him.

'Lie down,' she said. Roger lay down.

'I'm going to make you relax and remember,' said Julia.

And Julia talked.

Her words washed over Roger. Caressed his mind like a soothing balm. She conjured up Roger's quiet place. Images of a long white beach, leaning palms, a gentle breeze, a falling coconut, surf caressing his bare feet. Sunshine, on my shoulders, makes me happy ...

And there it was.

Like an unexpected thunderclap in glorious surround sound.

*

Roger was doing the school run in his black Land Rover Discovery. Harry was in the back seat. His second day at his new high school. His haircut was barely three days old. Everything he wore except for the jacket, tie and shoes had never been worn before. Shiny and new and

ever-so-slightly too big. Roger had to turn away with a tear in his eye and fake a cough when he first stood back from straightening Harry's tie. Jennifer would have been so proud of him. She would have wetted her thumb and tried to make Harry's cow lick sit down just like she had with Roger on their wedding day.

Slight Jennifer. Slim and pale. Small and completely sexy. Jennifer's heart had stopped with Harry's first breath. Roger's mind had collapsed with shock and only allowed him to wake two days later.

An exchange had been made. The physical creature that was the object of Roger's love, lust and worship had been replaced by a glorious baby boy in her image. What had been Jennifer would only ever inhabit a small corner of Roger's mind.

Roger tilted his head up and looked through the rear view mirror at Harry on the back seat. Jennifer would have been proud. You must be very proud, Jennifer.

Harry had moved up from the junior school and was in with the big boys now. He chatted happily about some new friends he had. They liked Yu-Gi-Oh too. They had special Egyptian God cards. The best cards to have, apparently.

They were running a little late. The mobile phone, secure in its hands free cradle, started to play its polyphonic imitation of Green Sleeves. Must change that one day.

It was Julia. Roger pressed the green button. 'Morning Julia,' he said.

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'Morning Julia,' shouted Harry from the back seat.

Julia acknowledged Harry then turned her attention to Roger. Had he worked it out yet?

There was a particularly difficult code Roger was working on which failed under some circumstances. Roger was finding it hard to capture the pictures the codes evoked. Normally it was like watching a film but this one was elusive. Like the DVD player kept sticking. Julia soothed and prodded Roger in an attempt to coax his mind into giving up the secrets that only years of supercomputing could emulate. She was obviously getting a lot of pressure on this one. She'd never shown such urgency before and was breaking her own rules about pushing Roger's fragile psyche too hard. She knew Jennifer had become an important element in Roger's mind. Jennifer had become the librarian. The keeper of facts. Roger's savant memory. Without the Jennifer component of his mind, they both knew he could barely perform.

Added to which, Harry was starting a new school and this was distracting Roger. Making him recall Jennifer as she was before she died. Not as the useful dispenser of facts and calculations needed for him to perform his miracles of code making and breaking.

Roger pushed back. All I'm doing is taking Harry to school for goodness sake. Couldn't this wait fifteen minutes! And no Harry, Julia knows nothing about Yu-Gi-Oh! I'm sorry Harry. I didn't mean to snap. Look Julia, I'll call you back when - There was a cyclist in the road. A girl with a bright orange satchel on her back was about

to disappear under the Land Rover's long black bonnet. Roger's body reacted seemingly independent of thought: his arms dragged the steering wheel to the right as his foot stamped on the brake pedal, the Land Rover swerved and teetered on its two left wheels, Roger corrected to the left and the Land Rover levelled and bounced back onto four wheels. The girl! Have I hit the girl on the bike? He couldn't see her over his shoulder. There she is in the wing mirror. Wobbling but safe. Thank God. He was on the wrong side of the road. There was a lorry coming. A dark green lorry with gold mirror writing on the front. And there was nowhere to go, girl on the left, parked cars on the right, and the brakes weren't stopping him fast enough. The lorry was still coming and Roger swerved the Land Rover violently to the right again, trying to squeeze between the parked cars and it was tipping over. Jesus! We're not going to make it! Bangs and crashes and insane jerks and tumbling ...

Roger hung in the seat belt. The engine screamed. Harry? He turned his head. Just a light brown blur. His eyes were inches from the interior roof of the Land Rover. A beige felt-lined roof he'd managed to keep clean until now. Roger struggled against his seat belt. The steering wheel pinned his right leg. He couldn't see around the buckled roof. The Land Rover was upside down.

'Harry?'

The engine continued to scream but Roger couldn't find the ignition key to turn the damn thing off. Nothing's where it should be.

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A stream of brightly coloured Yu-Gi-Oh cards flowed from somewhere above. They gathered on the sun roof below. Now blood, pooling in the sun roof. That will ruin his cards.

The engine coughed and was silent.

'Harry?!'

Roger struggled, wriggled, kicked against the restraining steering wheel and belts and managed to free himself enough so he could see onto the back seat. With one elbow in his beautiful son's blood, Roger saw that Harry had been crushed between the collapsed roof and his seat.

*

Aching metal creaked and pinged, and blood dripped.

Roger counted one hundred and eighty-one drips before strong hands pulled at him and lay him on hard ground. Voices talked. He heard himself respond. He was breathalysed, driven somewhere, talked to. There was a hand on his shoulder, then he was left to sit alone.

*

The police had dropped Roger off at his home. Roger assured them he was okay, waved them off standing in front of his red front door. He'd turned. Key in hand. And something started to grow in his stomach. Something big and green and it hurt. And it rose through his chest pushing air and malice and hate and evil and despair and pain, such pain. It rose and burst from Roger in a gasping, gagging moan. The pain will kill me, please, let it kill me.

GARY BAKER

Then his mind wiped itself. Swept those vile stinking turds pretending to be memories away and out and replaced them with something he could survive with. This mind had walked Roger, still sobbing, from his home in Barton to the Salvation Army building in Darlington.

*

Roger sat up on the couch, put his head in his hands and sobbed. Roger C sobbed. Jennifer sobbed. Roger B said, 'There, there.' Numb.

*

Julia sat forward, raised her hand to touch Roger then drew it back and wiped away a tear. She had known Roger for ten years. Met him two years after his wife had died.

Julia worked for the Ministry of Defence. She was not a code breaker but worked with people who were. Many very talented code breakers had personality and psychological issues. Some could multiply two five digit numbers instantly in their head or detect algorithmic sequences in pages and pages of seemingly random numbers but looked with puzzlement at their shoes when asked to put their best foot forward. Julia helped them get the best out of themselves in a variety of ways including hypnosis, life coaching and simply listening. She had gravitated to working with Autistic Savants and written many well received papers on nurturing and harnessing the extraordinary powers some exhibited.

Roger was an extreme rarity. A Savant with no debilitating Autistic problems. A freak who could 'see'

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the original message in data encrypted with a hundred and twenty eight digit security codes and read it out like everyone else reads an edition of The Times.

On the surface Roger was normal, if geeky. He owned a computer company which designed, wrote and marketed software. One of his products, the strangely named Tree-Baker, attracted the attention of the security guys during a routine test to see if they could use the product internally. Tree-Baker was a three dimensional telecommuting environment. Users could log in and see three dimensional representations of others in their group; could spin, move and travel through spaces and regions seeing their colleagues at work as if they were in the same office; could interact visually, by voice or just by text chatting. It made telecommuting, working from home, a reality by removing the key barriers of feeling alone or excluded.

Like any other large organisation, the MoD wanted to find out if this product could help them streamline and save money. During their tests they discovered something unique.

They couldn't crack the code. They could not break into the communications between users. They put their best people and computers onto the problem and still it would not yield its secrets.

This was extraordinary indeed. You have the originating message. You have the program that scrambles it. You have the intermediate scrambled message. You have the program that unscrambles it back to its original form. And still you can't work out how it's

done.

They contacted Roger, the designer who turned out to be the programmer too, and found he could translate the scrambled data back to its original form in just a few minutes. In his head.

They had to have him. Roger was too big an asset to leave lying around for someone else to pick up. He was a national resource. Like North Sea Gas, Roger had to be exploited.

And Julia was given the job of looking after him. Making sure Roger 'got with the program' and stayed with it. So for the last ten years Roger had been Julia's career.

Roger's hair was still thick and brown when they first met. He was a little shy, obviously loved his baby son, was attractive, brown eyed and tall. He quickly relaxed with her and, yes, she was attracted to him. He was normal and funny and sometimes witty and sometimes silly but always he held back. Julia could sometimes feel Roger take a breath to step forward and then stop himself.

Julia felt she knew Roger well. She had talked him through illnesses with Harry, school problems, self doubt and one very bad love affair.

Roger had a fairly normal problem addressing groups of people. A pretty standard failing. But to make the most of his talents he needed to be able to stand up in front of a crowd and lecture, discuss, teach, argue.

Julia helped Roger overcome his inhibitions. She used hypnosis. And it was there, under hypnosis, that she

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met Roger's dead wife, Jennifer. The Jennifer personality had become the keeper of Roger's special knowledge. Jennifer had grown from the strangely independent Savant section of Roger's brain to help him bear the agony of her loss.

Roger never mentioned Jennifer to Julia though she knew he talked to her. They communed on some level inaccessible to Julia.

For ten years Julia had supported Roger. It hardly seemed like ten months to her. His capacity to solve problems and come up with solutions seemed infinite. More and more work was thrown at him. Pressures grew. At one point Roger rebelled and demanded he work only nine thirty to six pm Mondays to Fridays instead of every single hour of every single day.

Julia spent her evenings and weekends collating Roger's daily output and collecting the next day's challenges and Roger lived an almost normal existence taking Harry to school in the mornings, picking him up from the childminder in the evenings, spending weekends cooking and playing football.

Julia had spent ten years watching Harry grow into a fine young boy and watching Roger grow into a fine father.

Now Harry was dead and his fine father was dripping tears and snot onto her beech-effect laminate flooring.

The beautiful brown eyed boy with a mania for some incomprehensible cards was a bloody mush and the powers that be were asking when his father would be

'productive' once more.

Julia had listened in horror to the crash on her mobile phone. Listened as Roger called to Harry. Listened as Roger had begged for mercy from a God he didn't believe in. Listened to Roger screaming threats and curses at that same God. Listened to Roger's pain.

Julia reached forward once more. Lay a gentle hand on Roger's shoulder. She could feel the heat of his skin through the cotton pyjama. Roger felt hot and damp. Too hot.

Julia barely breathed his name. 'Roger?' Her eyes pricked with tears once more as Roger began to rock, holding his stomach, holding the pain. She slid over and sat on the couch beside him. Held him. He turned and buried his head into her chest. Held her tight around the waste. She held on to his shaking body. Hot and damp.

After a few minutes the sobbing subsided. Roger straightened up. Julia held his face, wiped the tears away with her thumbs. Kissed his cheeks. Kissed his lips.

Roger pulled away. Held Julia at arm's length. His eyes cold. 'I want to be alone for a while,' he said. 'Come and get me at four.'

Roger stood and left the room and Julia listened as he went upstairs and closed the bedroom door. The floor above her creaked as Roger got back into bed.

Julia's mobile chirruped on the desk. They'd be wanting an update no doubt.

*

Naked and in a place devoid of colour, Jennifer and Roger stood and hugged each other. No tears. Just

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sadness.

'I'm sorry,' Roger said. 'I'm sorry for mistreating you. I'm sorry I had your head shaved and beat you and made you live in hell. I'm sorry.'

'I know,' Jennifer said.

'I'm sorry I patronised you with a silly dress and dinner,' Roger said.

'Actually, I quite enjoyed the dinner,' Jennifer said, smiling.

'I'm sorry I killed Harry,' Roger said. 'I'm sorry I blamed you for everything and got mad at you for leaving me and ...'

Jennifer looked serious again. 'I know,' she said.

They stood apart.

'We have to complete the plan,' Roger said.

'I know,' said Jennifer raising her chin.

Roger gripped Jennifer's neck with both hands and squeezed.

Chapter 18

Julia took some of Roger's clothes into him at ten minutes to four. He was not asleep.

'There's a towel, comb and toothbrush for you in the bathroom,' she said.

Julia went back downstairs and sat on her straight-backed leather chair, crossed her ankles, placed her hands on her lap and waited for Roger.

Roger came down at precisely four o'clock.

He walked into the room and lay down on the couch, crossed his ankles, knitted his fingers together across his stomach and took a deep breath.

'Jennifer's gone,' he said. 'I've killed her. I'm useless to you.' The rest of his breath expelled the words. Made sure they left him.

This was the first time Roger had said Jennifer's name to Julia while not under hypnosis.

'Test me,' said Roger.

Julia knew what Roger meant. Under hypnosis Roger would not be able to keep the truth from her.

Julia said the words. She felt light headed, elated and hoped her excitement would not impede the soothing balm of her voice.

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And there he was. Laid out like a dissected crow.

'Hello Roger', said Julia.

'Hello Doctor Julia,' said Roger.

'Can I talk to Jennifer, please?'

'Jennifer's dead. He killed her. Are you wearing stockings?'

'You know Jennifer isn't really dead don't you,' said Julia.

'Oh she's dead all right. Dead as a door-nail. Ask me go on ask me.'

'All right, Roger,' said Julia. 'What's the cube root of 5678?'

'Don't know,' said Roger. 'Don't care. Are you wearing stockings?'

Julia pushed Roger further. Talked to all of him. They weren't lying. She knew with mounting excitement that somehow Roger had purged himself of the gift that had become his gift.

Julia started composing her report even before the session was finished: *The subject, Roger Peerson, has suffered enormous psychological damage due to the loss of his only son and his Savant gifts are no longer ...*

The powers that be would argue of course. Are you sure? How can this be after ten years? Can we replace him? Is he now a liability?

Yes I'm sure; the human mind is a fragile thing; perhaps; no, he is not a threat.

Julia brought Roger out of hypnosis.

'Satisfied?' said Roger sitting up.

'Yes,' said Julia.

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Roger stood and walked to her desk and scribbled something on two pieces of yellow post-it. Handing them to Julia he said, 'Send these emails to these addresses, please.'

Roger walked to the door, stopped and turned.

'Roger ...' said Julia.

'Exactly as it's written,' said Roger.

'Yes,' said Julia.

*

West Cemetery, Darlington, County Durham.

Roger stood looking down at a plain, black granite headstone with gilt lettering. Lettering he couldn't bring himself to read.

'Harry will be joining you soon,' he said. 'You'll have to shift over a bit.'

Jennifer Penrose, thought Roger, how sweet you are.

Even when she became Mrs Jennifer Peerson, Roger always thought of her as Jennifer Penrose. He remembered the first time they had met: Roger interviewed her for a job as a computer programmer. He'd pointed out that her surname was an anagram of Peerson. His own surname. And she had laughed nervously. And it was that damn laugh that did it. A husky chuckle ending with a little piggy snort that made her put her hand over her mouth. And then she'd admitted that yes, she had noticed too. And laughed again and little piggy snorted and Roger was hooked.

Roger moved a leaf with his foot. 'I love you,' he said.

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'How fucking sweet is that,' said a gravely voice behind him. It took Roger a moment to realise it was Lenny.

'You survived,' said Roger. 'I thought you might.'

'Inde-fucking-structable me,' said Lenny. 'You did well yourself, mind. That was a long fucking way down.'

Roger turned round. Lenny was pointing a small silenced hand gun at his chest. 'You got the message then,' said Roger.

'Oh, yes,' said Lenny. 'But now,' Lenny waved the pistol back towards the cemetery gates, 'your presence is required elsewhere.'

'I'm not coming,' said Roger.

'Don't be -' Lenny's warning was cut off by Roger lunging forward and grabbing the gun. Roger's grip was like steel and Lenny felt Roger's thumb move over his trigger finger and squeeze.

Roger smiled and saw three figures over Lenny's shoulder. He saw himself and Jennifer stood either side of Harry, holding his hands. And the figure that was him was the three melded together. And Harry and Jennifer and he three smiled at him.

Chuck.

So that's what it feels like, thought Roger. Out loud he said, 'They're going to really fuck you now, Lenny.'

Roger's knees gave way and he fell face down onto the grass.

Lenny staggered back in disbelief. Pushed a hand through his hair. Roger lay still.

'Get the fuck up!' Lenny shouted. He pushed at

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Roger with his foot. Nothing. 'Oh, Christ,' he said.

PART TWO

Chapter 19

Meadhill sat looking at a computer screen in an anonymous hotel suit that could have existed practically anywhere in England and decided it was time for a coffee. Things were looking bad and there were going to be serious repercussions.

On the way to the kitchen area he caught sight of himself in a wall mirror and stopped to admire his reflection. Meadhill had washed out the black hair dye the previous evening. He looked approvingly at this new, naturally mature reflection. Grey, almost white hair, dark eyebrows, dark brown eyes, all nicely accentuated by the black suit and black shirt covering his tall, trim, athletic figure. He narrowed his eyes. Made them smile back. Made his mouth smile to show his gold upper left lateral incisor. Classy.

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Meadhill pursed his lips ever so slightly. Not bad. Though there was a tiny, irritating sprinkle of dandruff on his shoulders.

He turned away from his image - watching for as long as he could - and continued on to the kitchen area where a coffee machine waited for his light touch.

Standing on a shelf near the coffee machine, a pale tired purple tulip, looking sad among its haughty companions, bowed its head wearily. Meadhill pushed its stem back into the crystal vase; back into the water.

He pressed the cup symbol on the coffee machine. Nothing happened.

Meadhill cursed and brought the side of his fist down hard on the shiny stainless steel top of the coffee machine with a crash that made the shelf shudder and the vase of tulips wobble dangerously. He hit the machine again, even harder, before realising he had forgotten to select which coffee he wanted. He pressed the label marked 'Latté' as the tulip vase thudded without breaking onto the deep pile carpet. The contents spilled out - tulip stems suddenly naked, glistening.

The door buzzer sounded as he pressed the coffee cup symbol once more.

Coffee machine or door? Door.

Meadhill turned, grinding fresh wet crisp tulips into the carpet with his immaculate black shoes and made a mental note to have someone clean this shit up.

He stood to one side of the door. 'Who is it?' he said.

'It's ... me,' said a breathless voice Meadhill

recognised immediately as The Major's.

'It's open,' said Meadhill turning and moving back to the coffee machine. Behind him, the door sprung opened fully, thumping into the doorstop. The coffee machine dripped the last bubbly-beige testicles of foam into the cup as Meadhill reached it. He ignored the freshly poured latté and turned to his visitor.

Only The Major's stomach had made it into the room. Large and round and covered in one of Savile Row's finest pinstriped suits, The Belly heaved gently as its owner prepared to follow it through the doorway.

Meadhill smirked to himself, even more conscious of his own athletic build. Hands behind back. Chin up. Shoulders back. Stomach in. Stand tall. No expression.

The Major puffed into the room, jowls quivering. 'I should not have to come and see you,' he blustered. 'This is bloody ridiculous.'

Meadhill watched impassively as The Major swerved towards an armchair and wheezed himself down into a sitting position. A dark suited goon, The Major's bodyguard, mirrored Meadhill's stance in the doorway.

The Major took out a white handkerchief and wiped his upper lip. 'I am deeply unhappy,' he said, 'and extremely disappointed.'

Meadhill remained impassive. He knew why The Major was unhappy. Roger Peerson's clever little software bunnies were causing chaos with The KOPALDA's finances. They were hopping around and stomping where it really hurt. Somehow, money was being transferred to and from hundreds of accounts,

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leaking away like sand through a colander and The KOPALDA was helpless. As well as being technically unable to do anything, they were hindered by the potential publicity value of the problem.

'Still you have failed to located this one individual who is at the root of our problems,' said The Major.

When it became obvious Meadhill was not going to respond or defend himself against the accusation The Major struggled to his feet and, red faced at the effort, barrelled towards Meadhill. 'Do you need more resources?' Spittle from The Major speckled Meadhill's immaculate suit. He prodded a bulge near Meadhill's armpit. 'Or are you just too bloody stupid?'

Meadhill narrowed his eyes involuntarily.

The Major, forced to look up, prodded the side of Meadhill's head. 'Need more resources up here do we?'

Meadhill's jaw muscles writhed. The goon at the door tensed.

'I have a man picking up Peerson as we ... speak,' said Meadhill.

The Major fatally mistook Meadhill's calm tone for a submissive one. 'Well make sure you don't -' and on the word 'don't' The Major slapped Meadhill across the face, 'lose him this -' slap! 'time'.

The bulge under Meadhill's arm was gone. Its cause, a silenced automatic pistol, was pointed at the wide eyed goon.

Chuck.

The goon collapsed dead. Shot through the right eye.

Meadhill could taste syrup on the back of his teeth. Treacle. The taste of treacle poured over a bowl of hot porridge. Odd that.

The Major had turned white. Globbs of sweat quivered on his forehead and upper lip as Meadhill pressed the silencer against The Major's huge belly.

'Don't be a fool, John,' said The Major. 'You know it won't end with me. You know you'll never be able to stop running if ...'

Chuck.

'Don't ever call me stupid,' said Meadhill.

Chuck.

The Major stood frozen. Agape. Unbelieving. Breath held.

Meadhill sucked at the saliva as the taste of treacle grew stronger in his mouth and The Major leaned against him barely able to keep his bulk from falling.

'Die you fat fuck,' hissed Meadhill pressing the business end of the silencer against The Major's chest.

Meadhill's mobile phone rang in his pocket. He pulled it out with his free hand and flipped it open. 'Yes?' he said looking into The Major's watery eyes. A woman's voice had him confirm he was the same John Meadhill whose mother was in Leeds Royal Infirmary. He was. She had bad news. His mother had passed away and 'arrangements' had to be made.

'I'll have to get back to you,' said Meadhill. 'I need ... a few moments.'

'I understand,' said the woman from the Leeds Royal Infirmary.

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'Goodbye,' said Meadhill still looking into the Major's eyes. He flipped shut his phone.
Chuck.

Chapter 20

It was raining. It should always rain at funerals. Not too much, of course. Just enough of an annoying drizzle to make a person narrow their eyes and hunch their shoulders as they scurry to the chapel.

Meadhill neither hunched his shoulders, narrowed his eyes nor scurried. Unlike the vicar or parson or whatever the hell this weedy, thin excuse for a man called himself. Shakes hands like a fish, couldn't meet anyone's eyes and blushed like a schoolgirl whenever he talked to you. That, and his life revolved around a fucking fairytale.

The priest and Meadhill stood silently under cover at the entrance to the chapel of Lawns Wood Crematorium, Leeds. A hearse approached along the black, slick tarmac road winding between old headstones and weeping willows.

The priest cleared his throat.

Meadhill watched the hearse stop and four black suited pallbearers got out, opened the rear and slid out a

pale, wooden coffin.

The pallbearers, two on either side, stood for a moment preparing to lift the dead weight onto their shoulders. Meadhill saw they ranged in height from about five feet six to about six feet two. The shortest had hair to his shoulders and the tallest sported a shaved head. They executed the manoeuvre with practiced ease and, despite the odd angle at which they carried the coffin, managed to proceed past Meadhill and the Priest with some dignity.

That's my mum in there, in that box.

The coffin was laid on a table in front of a pair of Royal Blue curtains which stretched up to the ceiling. The pallbearers retired to sit a few rows back. Spreading themselves out. There was one elderly couple stood, arms linked, in the third row.

And, stood alone on the front row, Meadhill.

The son.

There was a small, brass plaque on the lid of the coffin. At that angle Meadhill couldn't read it but knew it would read Rosemary Jayne Meadhill.

Mum.

The woman who had said it was alright to cry when his hamster died. The woman who, when asked, 'mum, am I clever?' had answered, 'you're about average son.' The woman that, despite her only son making more money every month than she had made in a lifetime, still maintained he was just average. Like he was lying. The woman whose love-making with some greasy restaurant owner had kept her eleven year old son awake night after

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night after fucking night. The same greasy restaurant owner who had smashed a dinner plate in her face. The same mother who had cried in the dock when her only son had been sent down for stabbing a greasy, smelly restaurant owner in the neck with a fork.

She was in that box.

Meadhill felt in his pocket touching the cool smoothness of a photograph. The black and white photograph showed Rosemary Jayne, eight years old, dressed as a fairy and posing with a wand.

What a waste of fucking time this was. What was this skinny vicar bleating on about?

Meadhill's mobile phone buzzed and played a tune in his pocket. He pulled it out and flipped it open saying, 'Yes?'

The priest fell silent.

'In Leeds.' Meadhill's voice sounded harsh and alien bouncing round the chapel. A thin, unintelligible voice could be heard coming from his mobile phone.

'I'll be in London by tonight,' said Meadhill. 'I'll meet you ...' He paused, looking with obvious distrust at the priest and, lowering his voice, continued, 'tomorrow morning, oh nine-hundred hours at The Hawkhurst Plaza.'

Meadhill snapped shut his mobile phone, put it back in his pocket and looked at the priest who stood open mouthed and wide eyed.

The chapel was heavy with silence for a few seconds. Meadhill was the first to speak. 'Any chance we could speed this up a bit? Busy day ahead. Lots to do.'

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The priest pulled himself together and continued with the service.

Chapter 21

The Hawkhurst Plaza stood tall and alone just off the Edgware Road to the North of London. The surrounding narrow streets, most lined with seven feet high brick walls, were all one way and traffic calmed by yellow striped tar humps stretching from curb to curb. Litter, broken glass and patches of sticky liquids lay in wait for the unwary. Road and pavement repair gangs had not been near the area in decades.

The window of Meadhill's hotel room on the thirty-third floor looked south towards London. A magnificent view of the fruits of the labours of man. Man, whose blind, thoughtless hand had brushed away far more than William Blake could ever have countenanced. An observer, directing their gaze straight down, would see the lifeless warrens surrounding the hotel. Monuments to the brick maker's art.

Meadhill looked at his watch. Where was that scum Lenny Ludhoe? He'd better have that prick Peerson in tow.

Meadhill's phone buzzed and played its polyphonic

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party piece on the narrow dressing table.

'Yes!' snapped Meadhill.

'John Meadhill?'

He didn't recognise the voice.

'Yes. What is it?'

'I'm calling from AZA On-line Gaming, the account number you specified appears to be void of funds. Do you have another account number or perhaps a credit card we could use instead?'

'What?'

'It's AZA On-line Gaming, sir.'

'I don't know what you're talking about. I've never heard of AZA Gaming. You've ... got the wrong number.'

'Sir ...' The voice patiently quoted Meadhill's home address, his email address, and some numbers that were supposed to be his bank account and did sound familiar.

'Listen,' said Meadhill, 'that *is* me but you've been ... set up. I don't *do* gambling on-line. Okay?'

'Sir, if you could just give me another account number or a credit card number we could clear this up right now.'

'Are you fucking deaf? I don't do gambling on-line. Okay! Now I'm going to hang up and I don't want to hear your whiney little voice ever again. Okay!'

Meadhill didn't hang up.

'Sir, two hundred and twenty five thousand pounds is a significant sum and I strongly recommend you give me some means of clearing this debt immediately. The consequences of your not paying are very serious and I'll be forced to despatch a collector to the Edgware Road

straight away.'

Two hundred and twenty five grand! Peerson's little software bunnies have taken to jumping all over my personal finances now! And how ...

'How do you know where I am?'

'Your mobile phone, sir.'

Of course.

'You're bluffing,' said Meadhill. 'You'll know the general area but you can't pinpoint me that accurately.' Meadhill heard the defensive tone of his own voice and changed it. 'Anyway,' he hissed, 'listen to me: I will kill your collector, then you, then your family, understand?'

'Sir ...'

'Stay away from me. This is good advice, son.' Meadhill flipped his mobile phone shut and tossed it back onto the dressing table making it bounce against his laptop.

Three sharp taps on the hotel room door.

It couldn't be, could it? 'Who is it?'

'Lenny.'

'It's open,' said Meadhill. 'But don't bother coming in if Peerson's not with you.'

Lenny stepped into the room. 'He's dead,' he said.

Meadhill took a few moments to absorb the information.

'How?'

'The dickhead grabbed my fucking gun and shot himself with it.'

Meadhill sat down on the chair facing his laptop. The waving, coloured lines of the screen saver annoyed

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him so he prodded the mouse with his index finger. His Yahoo home page, showing the news items he had been browsing earlier, surfaced on the screen.

Meadhill looked past the screen into the mirror beyond and clamped onto Lenny's eyes.

'You killed him.' Meadhill's voice made Lenny flinch.

'Saying I fucking killed him is a bit strong. He grabbed my fucking gun. What was I supposed to do?'

'What you were supposed to do was to bring him back here so we could make him stop his little software bunnies from hopping all over The KOPALDA's finances causing me a lot of personal grief from our Lords and Masters.'

'Bunnies?'

'Which reminds me ...' Meadhill ignored Lenny and started tapping on the laptop's keyboard. Lenny circled the room and averted his eyes.

After a few seconds Meadhill cursed. 'Bastard.'

He stood, turning to face Lenny. 'Not only is your friend responsible for siphoning off millions of The KOPALDA's funds but ... worse still, he's managed to empty my own, personal, private bank account.'

The growl of Meadhill's voice and his menacing, almost panther-like, stance caused a rush of adrenaline to surge through Lenny's body. He quickly pulled out his hand gun from under his arm and pointed it, quivering slightly, at Meadhill.

'Now listen ...' said Lenny. But his brain couldn't form any more words. Meadhill relaxed. His shoulders

lowered and his arms hung loosely by his sides.

'Lenny,' said Meadhill, 'I'm not mad at you. I'm mad at that Peerson character. Arguing about ... responsibility is a waste of time. Granted. What we have to do is find someone capable of stopping these software-bunnies, Trojan, virus things, or whatever you call them, from doing us any more damage and, hopefully, reversing the processes too.' Meadhill turned back to his computer on the dressing table and picked up a small black hairbrush. 'Any suggestions?' he asked.

Lenny lowered his gun and swallowed hard. 'I don't know,' he said. 'There's that woman he used to work with. Julia something. She'll probably ...'

The hairbrush caught Lenny on the bridge of his nose and was instantly followed by the crushing weight of Meadhill who pinned him down with a knee on each arm and grasped about the throat.

Meadhill swallowed a surfeit of saliva. That treacle taste again. He looked down at Lenny whose face was already turning red.

'I wouldn't normally do this,' said Meadhill. 'Normally I like to make it quick.' Lenny bucked and thrashed his legs ineffectually. 'Steady on, lad. As I was saying, normally I make it quick but you leave me no choice.' Lenny's face was turning purple, his protruding tongue was turning the colour of blackberry juice, his eyes watering and bulging. 'It's a question of ... respect, you see.' Meadhill leaned down hard, his thumbs pushing deep into Lenny's neck crushing his larynx. 'What would people think if I let you point a gun at me and live?' He

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held his position until Lenny was almost motionless, then released his grip letting Lenny gasp for air through an agonising, crushed throat. Meadhill allowed Lenny three painful gurgling breaths then clamped his thumbs down on Lenny's throat once more.

In this way, Meadhill kept Lenny barely alive for three long minutes before he grew bored and ended the torture by throttling Lenny one last time.

Meadhill stood and walked to the cupboard where his jacket hung on a wooden hanger. He pulled out the picture of his mother, eight year old Rosemary Jayne dressed as a fairy, and held it up at eye level.

He poked the picture with a stiff index finger. 'Your fault,' he said.

Chapter 22

Roger's head pulsed painfully with every heartbeat. There was an enormous pressure behind his eyes. For a moment he thought he was going to vomit and tried to sit up. A pain that originated in his stomach slammed through his body subsiding slowly to a dull ache extending into his back, up to his chest and down to his testicles.

Roger held his breath not daring to move in case that nightmare hurt returned. Very slowly, he settled back, relaxed, allowed himself to breathe.

He was in a bed. His head rested on soft pillows and cool sheets and a light blanket covered him.

His eyes stuck together. Scared of the pain, Roger dare not move his hand to his face. He tried opening his eyes by raising his eyebrows and lowering his cheeks. It was working. Left eye open. Right eye open. Everything was blurred. Some rapid blinking and Roger could make out diagonal stripes on the ceiling. It was night and lights outside were illuminating the room through Venetian blinds.

That distant sound. Sensible shoes on hard, vinyl tiles floors. Tin things rattling against each other. Mumbling. A constant hum.

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That smell.

He was in hospital.

A black, liquid curtain seemed to close over his brain and Roger fell back into a deep sleep.

*

'Roger.' ... Someone wants me. Soothing voice ... 'Roger.' ... I'm in that hospital room ... 'Roger. Do you know where you are?'

It's very bright. She looks nice. 'I'm ... I'm in hospital, aren't I?'

'That's right. Do you know your surname?'

'Peerson.' I'm alive. 'I thought you were an angel for a second there.'

'Feeling better are we?'

The pretty face, blue eyes, and tied back dark hair of the young lady fussing around Roger - straightening his covers and plumping his pillows - didn't look like a nurse. No hat. Nurses wear hats, don't they? This one wore a white trouser ... thing. Had a ponytail.

'Are you a doctor?' asked Roger with a little difficulty. 'Oh. Could do with a glass of water?'

'Nurse. Becky. Becky Ketteringham.'

A plastic beaker of room temperature water appeared before Roger's lips. He drank eagerly, wincing at the pain as he tried to sit up. Nurse Becky held Roger forward as he drank, managing to insert another pillow behind him. 'That's better,' she said. 'Hungry?'

Roger sat back holding his stomach. 'Actually ... yes.' Despite the sharp pain in his abdomen, Roger still felt an emptiness.

'Toast?'

'Sounds good.'

While Nurse Becky went off to get his toast, Roger surveyed his surroundings. His bed was in the middle of a pale green room, set at a jaunty, almost negligent angle. It didn't look like a ward but was unmistakably a room in a hospital. His was the only bed and there was too much equipment. He was surrounded by trolleys and machines on wheels. It was a large space and curtain runners suspended from the ceiling marked out positions for beds which, had they been present, would have been arranged as a small, six bed ward.

Two double doors with round, portal windows allowed for access, while Venetian blinds, covering two large windows, did little to block out the bright sunlight.

Roger could see he was wearing a hospital gown open at the front. Small cloth ties lay undone on his chest mingling with his chest hairs. He ventured a look under his covers and saw a large padded bandage had been placed high on his stomach. Almost on his chest.

Christ. How much damage did the bullet do?

He then realised that a hospital towel had been folded and placed over his genitals and between his legs. The towel had obviously been pressed into place quite firmly. Why? Had he wet himself? Got an erection? Probably best not to ask.

Nurse Becky returned with two slices of perfect, golden brown buttered toast and a cup of tea which she placed on a small table expertly rolled into place with her foot.

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The warm toast crunched between his teeth. Sweat butter swam in his mouth threatening to ooze out onto his chin.

The tea was pale and milky and way too sweet, but today it was the best tea Roger had ever tasted.

He finished his tea and toast quickly and wanted more but Nurse Becky had disappeared.

He was slipping down the bed. Roger took the weight on his hands and tried to push himself back up onto the pillows but his injury complained. 'Ow. Shit!'

'Are you alright?' Nurse Becky had been behind the bed.

'Yes,' said Roger. 'Sorry. Just trying to get comfortable.'

'You sit still. I'll be done in a second then we'll get you onto the ward.'

'How ... am I?'

'Very lucky. The bullet missed all your vitals. Lot of blood lost but you are going to be fine.'

'Great,' said Roger with little enthusiasm.

'You're probably feeling groggy from the anaesthetic. They gave you one while they removed the bullet and stitched you up.'

'Don't feel to bad. Sore throat for some reason.'

'You were intubated – had a special tube pushed down your throat - and you're probably dehydrated too.'

Roger nodded wondering when someone was going to ask what had happened. Which made him realise something.

'How did I get here?' he asked.

'Not sure. I think someone found you at the cemetery and called 999. Your things are in the drawer in that cupboard next to you. You might want to see what the mugger stole. Back in a second.' Nurse Becky, walking quickly, left the room.

Mugger. That's as good a story as any. Saves me explaining Lenny et al.

Nurse Becky returned after a few minutes with a male orderly. The pair manoeuvred Roger and his bed with attached drip out into the corridor and along to a small, three bed ward which had a gap where the centre, third bed should have been. This was Roger's slot. He nodded to the bearded occupant of the bed to his right. The man nodded saying, 'Now then.' Darlington's equivalent to London's 'Alright mate?'

The occupant of the bed to Roger's left was flat out, mouth agape, fast asleep.

Nurse Becky thanked the orderly, who left, then pulled Roger's curtain closed around his bed. 'Back in a sec,' she said. 'The Doctor wants to examine you.'

Nurse Becky's smiling blue eyes made Roger want to respond. He raised his hand. 'Thanks,' he managed.

She smiled raising one corner of her mouth. And was gone.

Roger relaxed. He felt suddenly weary. He should be dead. He remembered grabbing Lenny's gun and trying to point it up at his own heart. Forcing that trigger back with what he hoped was contempt in his eyes.

Being shot was weird. He didn't remember any pain. Just a feeling of 'this is it. It all ends here.'

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But it hadn't ended and Jennifer and Harry were still dead. And I am alive.

Tears pricked at Roger's eyes. He put his head back, the ceiling a blur. The shapes and shadows above brought back the accident: the phone call with Julia, the girl cyclist with the bright orange satchel on her back, the squealing tyres, the lorry, the green lorry with gold writing, and the lorry driver, looking so intense. The memory smashed into Roger's mind's eye making him flinch. The image of the lorry driver's face flew towards him like a badly executed camera zoom. He recognised the lorry driver! Lenny. Lenny! Lenny was driving the lorry! The lorry he swerved to avoid.

Lenny was there driving the lorry.

The KOPALDA was there.

When Harry died.

When Harry was killed.

Nurse Becky arrived with the Doctor and a man in a grey suit. Dressings were lifted and replaced. Roger was prodded and poked, asked questions. He answered yes or no. Lifted his arms dutifully. Gave his address. Didn't ask questions in return. Didn't elaborate. Roger's hate numbed his responses.

The man in grey was a policeman. Roger confirmed he'd been mugged. Couldn't remember what the mugger looked like. Nothing had been stolen. The mugger must have got frightened and run off after Roger had tackled him and the gun had gone off.

'You're very lucky, sir,' said the policeman. 'This could very easily have been a murder investigation. I

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hope you'll think twice before having a go if – heaven forbid – it should ever happen again, sir.'

'I'm tired,' said Roger.

The Doctor and policemen left through the curtain.

Nurse Becky held Roger's hand. 'You okay?' she asked. Frowning slightly.

Roger looked into Nurse Becky's eyes. He said the words out loud for the very first time, set them free, made them an immutable part of the universe, embedded forever.

'Harry's dead. My son is dead.'

Roger put his head back and, from his tightly shut eyes, squeezed tears which rolled down cheeks shuddering with silent grief.

Nurse Becky swallowed hard, took a deep breath then, giving Roger's hand one last squeeze, left to check on another patient.

He felt the nurse leave.

The KOPALDA had killed Harry.

The Trojans stealing their money hadn't been enough. Not nearly enough.

*

That night Roger slept and dreamed of cockroaches, snakes and places where the dark writhed, dangerously alive.

He woke with a start. The pain in his stomach reminded him, with some relief, that the black, razor clawed entity he had been fleeing from, was just a cruel fabrication of his own mind.

'Now then. Just in time for breakfast. What you in

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for?' The brown bread voice came from his right. Sleeping beauty, to Roger's left, slept on.

'Morning,' said Roger, squinting his eyes against the light. 'What time is it?'

'Eight. You're just in time. If you sleep through it you have hell of a time getting summat to eat round here afore dinner.'

Roger pushed himself gingerly to a sitting position in time for the arrival of a plump, jovial orderly and her rattling trolley of assorted cereals, tea and coffee.

Roger found out later that these ladies who trundled food and beverages cheerfully around the hospital were called 'ward hostesses'.

This ward hostess was greeted by brown bread voice.

'Watch out,' he said, 'it's Florence Nightingale.' He tagged a wheezing laugh onto the end of his greeting.

'You should be so lucky,' said the ward hostess, adding a similar wheezing laugh.

Though Roger's bladder was pleading to be emptied, he accepted a bowl of Crunchy Nut Cornflakes with tepid, skimmed milk, and a coffee.

Nurse Becky came to Roger's rescue after he pushed what he hoped wasn't a dire-emergency-button, hung on a cord by his bedside. He was, however, a little taken aback when his request to be helped to the loo was answered by Nurse Becky closing the curtain around his bed and producing a large necked, flat sided bottle for him to pee into. Which he did, noisily, after some fumbling.

GARY BAKER

Nurse Becky took his pulse while he peed.

'So, you must be the relief nurse,' said Roger instantly regretting he'd said it.

'Urine the right place for that kind of humour,' said Nurse Becky, her blue eyes twinkling at Roger. 'Feeling better?' she asked taking the full bottle from Roger and, not waiting for his response, continued, 'Thanks. We'll have this checked out right away.'

'Thank you,' said Roger finding it hard not to smile back at this open, friendly face. The swish of her dark ponytail dusted the air of gloominess leaving only twinkley happiness in its wake.

Give me a break, said Roger B.

*

The day passed slowly giving Roger the opportunity to think. To grieve and regroup. To let his anger subside to a low frequency hate. To think about a plan.

He could not go back home to his house in Barton. They would be watching. Either The KOPALDA or Julia and The Department. Or both. He needed somewhere else to go. They might be watching now. Right now. In this hospital. Or waiting for him to leave. How long will I be here?

'Barring complications, you should be home in four or five days,' said a boy doctor.

'Complications?'

'Infection.'

When the time comes, thought Roger, I have to leave here unseen. Go to a hotel perhaps. No. They could track the credit card. Need cash. Could get five-hundred

NURSE BECKY GETS SHOT

pounds from a machine in the centre of Darlington then go somewhere else. Five-hundred would last me a while. Need a plan. My laptop. Need some help. Maybe nurse Becky? She seems to not dislike me. Or was she just doing her nursely duty? Cheques. I could go to the bank and get some of those emergency cheques. Then I could use them for larger amounts. Come to think of it, I could get more cash from the teller. That would be better than using a machine. Wouldn't it? Are teller transactions as traceable as card machine transactions? Can't think. I should know this. Can't remember. With a laptop I could move money to different accounts. There is a way. There has to be a way.

*

On the third, slow day of Roger's recovery, something happened.

Nurse Becky closed the curtain around Roger's bed, sat facing him with one leg on the mattress, the outside of her thigh pressed against his hip, held his hand and looked into his eyes.

'You've had no visitors,' she said quietly. 'You sit and stare at the ceiling all day. You never talk to anyone.' Roger looked down at her hands. They looked quite small. 'Can I get you anything? Magazines? Newspaper? A book?'

'How tall are you?'

Nurse Becky cocked her head on one side causing her ponytail to swing briefly into view. 'Five feet four.'

'With your hands in the air, maybe.'

'Cheeky!' She smiled then looked serious. 'Look; I

know your son died recently, have you any other family?
A wife?

'No. There's just me. Are you married?'

'No. Listen; if you need anything you only have to ask me. You know that don't you?'

Roger nodded.

It was such a simple offer. One that is made by thousands of people every day. For a moment Roger thought of Nurse Becky's unconditional offer of kindness, and pictured a globe where similar offers were being made in every town in every country on every continent. A planet whose inhabitants first thought, when meeting someone, was, if there's anything you need just let me know.

What a load of sentimental crap. Wake up, boy burbler. This bimbo might be useful.

'You're very kind,' said Roger. 'Your boyfriend is a very lucky chap.'

Nurse Becky leaned forwards. 'I don't have a boy friend.'

Then, for one heart stopping moment, Roger felt she was going to kiss him on the cheek. But she didn't. She patted his hand, stood then opened the curtain.

Now that, thought Roger, was pathetic. No way was she going to kiss you. On the cheek or any other place, lonely boy. Just because you wish for something doesn't make it happen. Just because ... and Roger felt as though a hand had reached in and gently held onto his heart for a moment. Stopping it beating then letting go again. Leaving him feeling ever so slightly nauseous.

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Roger inhaled to speak.

Just at that moment, brown bread voice, whose left leg was bandaged rigid, decided to try to get out of bed by himself to go and have a cigarette.

Nurse Becky, fists on hips, glared fiercely at him.

'Alright, alright.' Brown bread voice sank back, coughing, into his bed.

Nurse Becky turned back to Roger, winked and walked out.

She was very pretty. And that smile was very cheeky. Nice figure too. A genuine what you see is what you get person. And what is it about the way that damn ponytail swings as she walks?

*

It was day four of Roger's stay in the Darlington Memorial Hospital and he had just been examined by the boy doctor. The news was good. He could leave the following day.

A taxi had been organised for Roger. It would be outside the main entrance at ten o'clock the following morning.

Roger found it difficult to sleep that night. Sleeping beauty to his left suddenly became Mister Reads-with-a-torch-and-scratches-a-lot. Mr Ratslot for short. Brown bread voice snored like a friendly brown-bear loaf.

First, Roger's feet felt hot. Then his pillow was too hot. Then his fingers prickled so he held his arms out of the bed and low to encourage the blood to flow through his hands.

GARY BAKER

He tried his old trick of imagining a completely blank piece of white paper, A4, held in front of his face. But his mind wandered; Harry, revenge on The KOPALDA, money, where to go, avoid being seen, Nurse Becky's lips.

Blank paper. Imagine blank white paper. Concentrate. Now is not the time to fantasize what Nurse Becky may be wearing under that white uniform. White stockings with lacy bits at the top? Blank white paper! An erection at this time in this place would be about as welcome as a mole on a bowling green. A bacon-buttie at a bar mitzvah.

But Roger did sleep and after breakfast Nurse Becky pulled the curtains around his bed, blushed and handed him a carrier bag from Marks and Spencer. She had bought him a new shirt to replace the one ruined by Lenny's bullet.

Roger tried to make himself think that she was an idiot for helping him but he was touched.

'Do you need help?' she asked him.

Roger's mind said yes but his voice said, 'No, I'll be fine. Thanks.'

She left him in his private space to cautiously sort himself out, put on his new vertically creased white shirt and push the curtains out with his behind as he put on his trousers.

Crunching up to put on his socks hurt his stomach and he almost called for help tying his shoelaces - he felt dizzy from holding his breath while the rabbit went round the tree and down into the hole.

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He was dressed. His wallet was intact. One hundred and eighty pounds cash. More than he remembered. Credit and debit cards. A folded and creased strip of four pictures of him and Harry pulling faces in a photo booth. Roger had a big droopy moustache and a little van Dyke tuft of hair under his lower lip in those days. Those days. The photograph was taken only three years ago.

Time to go.

Roger pushed back the curtains, nodded at sleeping beauty, turned and said, 'Bye then and good luck,' to brown bread voice.

'You're off then?'

'Yes, bye.'

'All a best.'

'Thanks.'

Roger spun on his heel and Nurse Becky was there smiling at him. He smiled back. They stood for a moment before Roger realised she was waiting for him to sit in a wheelchair standing between them. He drew breath to speak and elected instead to sit carefully in the wheelchair hoping it would not go rolling back as he sat down.

He sat back and Nurse Becky pushed him out of the ward, along corridors to the lifts. Alone in the lift heading down, Nurse Becky smoothed Roger's hair.

There was a black and yellow taxi waiting for him.

Roger stood from the wheelchair and Nurse Becky and Roger faced each other.

'Thank you,' said Roger. They both expected him

to say more.

'Take care of yourself and don't come back,' said Nurse Becky. She pushed her lips together then turned and wheeled the wheelchair back through the entrance into the hospital. Roger took half a pace forward. The automatic tinted safety glass doors closed. His own reflection looked back at him looking old and slightly bent. Not attractive. Hollow. Grey.

Roger turned and got into the back seat of the taxi.

'Where to?' asked the driver.

'Town,' said Roger. 'High road, opposite Natwest.'

The streets on the way to Darlington Town centre seemed alien. People walked looking at the pavement. Avoiding eye contact. Or so it seemed to Roger. He could not resist turning round and noting the traffic behind. That black car; always two cars behind. No, it's turned to go round the ring road.

The taxi driver said nothing until they pulled up outside the bank.

'Two seventy-five, sir.'

Roger handed the taxi driver three pound coins telling him to keep the change and felt cheap. No cars pulled up behind or ahead of the taxi. He entered Natwest.

His debit card got him one thousand pounds in cash from the teller.

'I need cash to get a good deal on a new computer,' he'd explained even though no explanation had been asked for.

Roger took his money and, never once looking

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back, walked south down High Road and then west along Conniscliffe Road then down West Street to the Victoria roundabout.

On the other side of the roundabout were some bushes that Roger knew fronted the fence and gardens of a block of redbrick and sandstone flats. The flats formed a courtyard with numerous entrances and exits a person could dodge through.

He'd discovered a hole in the hedge and fence months previously. He was bursting for a pee following a session in a pub called Number 22. Number 22, or, Jurassic Park, as it was known by youngsters as it tended to be full of dinosaurs. Middle-aged men drinking from a selection of splendid real ales. He'd slipped through the hole and relieved himself hoping he wouldn't be spotted in the shadows and that the traffic noise would drown out the sound of him unburdening himself of several pints of reprocessed Black Sheep Ale.

Roger hoped the hole was still there and quickened his pace as he drew closer, holding his stomach for support.

It was, and it was just as he remembered. He could duck through the hedge, through the fence and go in any one of several directions unseen. He paused at the first corner, turned and peeked around a wall at the gap in the fence from which he had just emerged.

No one followed him. He waited. Counted slowly to sixty.

No one.

He was not being followed. That was surprising

and, in a strange way, disappointing. Roger frowned. Perhaps Lenny had left him for dead. No. Surely he would have checked. Or maybe he had been whisked off to hospital before Lenny could do anything about it and they had lost him. Or perhaps they were waiting for him at his home.

Roger walked to the northern entrance into the apartment gardens and courtyard. Left or right?

He sat down on a low wall. Took stock. His legs ached and his heart pounded. His wound was fine. Just itchy.

A greasy spoon café caught Roger's eye on the other side of the road. He'd been there before. Coffee. Food. Yes.

Roger ate and drank and decided he would make his move on Nurse Becky Ketteringham that evening. He would wait outside the hospital for her when she left for the night and ... He'd think of something. Until then, ah yes, a newspaper.

*

Roger stood to one side of the hospital entrance. It was colder than he had anticipated and he huddled against the bricks which reluctantly shared some of their hard won daytime warmth.

This is madness, thought Roger. On several levels.

So many people coming and going. She could very easily slip past him. There she was. That dark, swinging ponytail was unmistakable.

'Becky!'

She turned, eyes wide, expectant.

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'Roger!'

'Yes, sorry, I ...'

'What are you doing here? You look freezing. You haven't been here all day have you?'

'I ...' Oh, crap.

'What?'

'I wanted to see you and ...'

Becky cocked her head to one side. Eyebrows raised.

'I don't want to go home just yet and I thought you would be hungry so the least I could do is take you out for a meal especially after all you've done for me and this new shirt and everything and we didn't say goodbye properly for goodness sake and, well ... what do you say?'

Becky folded her arms. A common stance among nurses. 'Roger,' she said. 'You seem to be an intelligent man. You've heard of transference, yes?'

Roger scratched his head. 'Yes.'

'Well?' Becky looked at Roger with 'stop being a pranny' written all over her face.

'So you think, instead of just wanting to thank you for all you've done for me over the last five days, I have fallen in love with you and want to marry you, have six kids and live happily ever after? Is that it?'

'Well, don't you?' Becky turned and starting strolling towards the car park. Roger caught up to her.

'Not in the least,' he said.

'Not even a little bit?'

'Well, said Roger. 'Maybe a little bit.'

They stopped walking and for two slow heartbeats

Becky looked up at Roger with a smile that eclipsed everything. Then she became serious, looked over his shoulder focusing on a 'pay and display' sign.

I'm losing her.

Roger placed a hand over the area of his wound. 'I know you're thinking of the nicest possible way you can tell me this is all very inappropriate and I should run along so you can go home,' said Roger, 'but ...' He shook his head. 'I don't really want to go back to that empty house and you've been so kind and rather than just get you flowers or a box of chocolates and say a cold "thank you" I thought something a little more ... personal? Personal is the wrong word. Something that's a bit more than just buying something. A nice meal, perhaps. A real thank you.'

Becky looked into Roger's face. Left eye, right eye, left eye, right eye.

'Roger,' she began, looking down at the ground.

Roger interrupted her: 'No,' he said. 'I understand completely.' He held his stomach, hunched forward, looked pathetic, began to turn away.

'Oh, for goodness sake,' said Becky. 'If you turn out to be some kind of mad axe murdering stalker type, I'll never hear the end of it. Mum will have a field day.' Becky turned and carried on walking further into the car park. 'Come on then,' she called over her shoulder.

Roger, scanning the area and nearby parked cars, followed.

*

Becky had a small Ford Ka. She sat very close to the

NURSE BECKY GETS SHOT

steering wheel and drove, as far as Roger was concerned, like a complete lunatic.

She took them to the North of Darlington where she lived in a small black and white detached house on a modern estate.

She was fond of cats. Two fluffy white specimens blinked at Roger when he entered the small, neat living room. He noticed that virtually everything in the room was trimmed with tassels.

Becky tripped lightly up the stairs.

'Back in a sec,' she called. 'Make yourself comfortable.'

Roger lowered himself onto a be-tasselled easy-chair, and one of the cats immediately strolled over, jumped up, and sat on his lap.

Becky was quick.

The ponytail was gone. Her face, framed by her dark wavy hair, looked fresher, her lips plumper and she'd opted for denim. A denim shirt and denims. Matching her denim blue eyes.

Roger looked up at her feeling a little like the James Bond villain Blofeld as he sat stroking his white cat.

'Wow,' he said. 'You look great.'

'Thanks.'

'And you have a fondness for tassels, I see.'

'Mother,' said Becky.

'Ah,' said Roger needing no further explanation. Of course. The mother.

'Come on,' said Becky, 'I'm starving.'

Outside they stopped and looked at each other over the roof of the small Ford.

'I miss the ponytail,' said Roger.

Becky pulled something out of her pocket, pushed back her hair, did some kind of twist and snap and there it was. She grinned at Roger and disappeared into the Ford. That mysterious hand reached into his chest and gently paused his heart, leaving him feeling faintly queasy once more.

They had pizza. And it was delicious. And they had red wine. And that was delicious. And Roger asked about Becky. Her childhood, her parents, her schools, her nursing, how many of her patients had she dated?

'None!' said Becky scandalised. 'And this isn't a date.'

'Of course it's a date.'

'No it isn't,' said Becky playing with a small silver crucifix around her neck. 'A date has to be made in advance. The clue is in the name. You have to agree to meet someone on a particular date.' She put the crucifix between her lips.

'So we're on a now,' said Roger.

'What?' said Becky letting the crucifix fall from her mouth to hang against her shirt.

'You agreed to go out with me as soon as I asked you. So, by your logic, we're definitely on a now.'

'I didn't agree to go *out* with you. I simply agreed to accept some of your hospitality as a thank you for the wonderful way in which I nursed you back to the peak of health.' Becky took a bite of pizza.

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Roger smiled, sipped his wine and saw that Becky had perfect white teeth and perfect pink fingernails with perfect pale lunula.

Becky dabbed her lips with a serviette. 'So,' she said, 'You don't sound as if you come from Darlington.'

'No, I suppose not. I spent quite a while in South Africa and a few years in London,' Roger said. 'But it's all very boring. When did you decide you wanted to be a nurse?'

'Ah,' said Becky. 'Mum's favourite story.' Becky went on to explain that on her sixth birthday she had been bought two outfits: a nurses uniform, of course, and a Wonder Woman costume. The seven year old boy next door had responded to each outfit differently. When Becky was dressed as Wonder Woman the young lad would don his Superman outfit and crash into her demonstrating his superior powers. But when she dressed as a nurse, the lad would put on his cowboy gear and lay with his head in her lap demanding succour after having been injured while fighting cattle rustlers.

The evening passed quickly and before he realised it Roger found himself being ushered from the restaurant to stand shivering with Becky in the cold night air.

Roger tsked then said, 'Should have ordered a taxi.'

'Do you mind?' said Becky. 'Barton's quite far and I have an early start tomorrow.'

'Not at all. No. I wasn't -'

Becky interrupted him, pointing, 'Look.' A black and yellow minicab had turned out of a side street. It looked empty.

GARY BAKER

Roger whistled through his teeth and raised his arm. Which was a mistake. Pain took Roger's breath away.

'Shit,' he gasped, holding his stomach. 'That hurt. I think something went ping.'

Becky put her arm across his shoulders. 'Come on,' she said. 'Let's get you to the car. I should take a look at that.' The taxi accelerated past them.

Roger didn't argue. Let himself be led.

'Are you okay to drive?' Roger asked as they slowly approached her Ford.

'I'll be fine. Come on, I'm freezing.'

'I'm really sorry about this.'

'Think nothing of it,' said Becky, unlocking the car. 'Now mind your head.'

The drive back to Becky's house was done at a sensible speed.

She made Roger lie down on the be-tassled couch after shooing away one of the cats.

'Actually, I feel a lot better,' he said as Becky opened his shirt.

After a quick examination Becky declared Roger as 'sound as a pound'.

Roger struggled to his feet, grunting heroically. 'Thanks,' he said. 'You've been too kind, really.'

'No problem.'

'I suppose I'd better get home and see what the contents of my fridge have evolved into,' Roger said, carefully avoiding any hint of enthusiasm.

'You might as well sleep here,' said Becky

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resignedly, pulling Roger's shirt closed. 'Hang on.' Becky left the room and jogged up the carpeted stairs.

Roger stood in the living room blinking back at the cats while Becky made thudding noises above them.

Eventually, she came down with a pillow, some sheets and a duvet.

Pushing the bundle into Roger's arms she raised herself on her toes and kissed him on the cheek.

'Good night,' she said, leaving Roger alone with the cats.

*

Becky woke Roger the next morning. For a moment he thought he was still in hospital.

'Wake up sleepyhead. There's coffee in a pot in the kitchen.'

'What? Thanks.'

'I have to go to work and besides, I'd hate to come between you and Chloe.'

'Chloe?' Roger could feel a weight on his chest. He looked up into the face of the friendlier of the cats. 'Oh. Morning Chloe.' Chloe purred.

'Bye,' said Becky.

The front door clapped shut and Roger sank back to doze. Chloe's purring made everything seem safe.

Roger dozed for an hour before tentatively raising himself to a sitting position. Chloe walked up his chest and draped herself round his neck. She kept her claws retracted as he lifted her off his shoulders and to the floor.

His stomach was sore.

GARY BAKER

He washed, dressed and folded up his sheets and duvet then explored the modest house on tiptoe.

The kitchen was small and the cabinets made from reclaimed pine. A tiny dining room had a four-seater table surrounded by cardboard boxes. Used more as a storage area than for entertaining and dining.

A steep, carpeted staircase climbed through the centre of the house.

The front bedroom, with not a tassel in sight, had a very busy dressing table and a double bed with a cream duvet.

The second bedroom at the rear overlooked a tidy lawn. A diamond mesh wire fence separated Becky's lawn from a school's playing fields. The room was used as an office with a computer and a wireless broadband connection to the Internet.

Perfect.

Chapter 23

Meadhill got a mobile phone call. The little screen said it was 'Andy M'.

Auntie M, he thought, unconsciously making the fearsome ridiculous.

Most names come complete with baggage. For Meadhill, the name Andy, was no exception. For him, all Andys were tall slim, probably blonde and always pliable and accommodating.

This Andy took that baggage, emptied it on the floor and jumped all over it.

This Andy was an evil tempered, shaven headed, concrete plinth of a man. He was a very experienced and determined mercenary, had fought successfully all over the world and never asked why, just how much. Very useful to The KOPALDA on a number of occasions. The M did not stand for mercenary. It stood for MacDonald. Andy was called Big Mac by those he liked.

Meadhill flipped open the phone. 'Yes?'

'We have to meet,' said Andy.

'Who is this?' said Meadhill. A pretence. Why let Andy think his number's important enough to be recognised?

'We have to meet now.'

'Andy? Is that you?'

'One hour. At the warehouse.'

Meadhill's mobile phone clicked in his ear. He looked at the little screen. It read, 'Terminated By Caller'.

*

The warehouse was really a corrugated roof on twenty-foot stilts surviving at the forgotten end of a rusting trading estate. The only windows which overlooked it belonged to machine shops and derelict engineering sheds. Their glass made opaque by grime and green slime.

Two cars were already angled under the roof when Meadhill arrived. Seven men dressed in black stood around. There didn't appear to be anyone else in the cars.

Meadhill stopped his car, pocketed the keys and got out.

Seven men stiffened and approached slowly. Six stopped after a few paces and one continued. Andy M. Six feet high in his black socks and two hundred and twenty three pounds of battle-scarred meat. The muscles of his arms prevented them from hanging straight down and they bounced gently forward with each step, their bulk dragging at his heavy shoulders.

'It's nothing personal,' said Andy, stopping six feet from Meadhill and fixing him with grey, narrowed eyes. 'We just want the money we're owed.'

'You mean you haven't got it?' Meadhill was incredulous. 'It hasn't gone through? Is that all?'

'Don't, Meadhill!' Andy's voice boomed around the

NURSE BECKY GETS SHOT

warehouse. He was a big lad, alright. 'Don't pretend. Not to us. Tell us what's gone wrong and when we'll get our money.'

'You have absolutely nothing to worry about.' Meadhill, a thoughtful expression on his face, turned at a slight angle. 'Perhaps ...' he began, 'Perhaps you should learn some fucking manners.' A black stiletto slipped from his sleeve into his right hand. Meadhill aimed a deadly, arching blow at Andy's neck.

Andy avoided the blade by moving back three inches. He caught and clamped Meadhill's swinging arm with two huge hands, leaned back, and used Meadhill's own momentum to spin him around and throw him back towards the semicircle of six men standing behind him. Meadhill struggled to remain upright, realising with genuine admiration that Andy had somehow managed, by twisting his arm before he let go, to hang on to his knife.

'Nice move,' said Meadhill.

Andy threw the stiletto forcefully at Meadhill's right foot. The blade easily penetrated Meadhill's black leather upper and sliced through the flesh between his second and third metatarsal.

Meadhill dropped to one knee with a gasp, grabbing at the blade. He let go immediately. Moving the blade was almost intolerable. Anger blacked his eyes further. He reaching inside his jacket but stopped short of pulling out his gun. Six silenced automatic pistols pointed at his head.

'You're alive because you owe us money,' hissed Andy. 'You and your KOPALDA friends have twenty-

four hours to move the money into every last one of our accounts.'

The seven men climbed into the two cars. Two men always faced Meadhill. Andy rolled down his window. 'Plus twenty-four per cent interest,' he added. 'For the trouble. Tomorrow that will be forty-eight per cent interest.'

Each car reversed out in turn and sped off down the back road leading through the industrial estate and away.

Meadhill held his breath and took hold of the knife. One, two ... Because he was alone, Meadhill allowed himself a gasping cry as he pulled the blade from his foot.

He stood, looking down, feeling his shoe fill with blood.

'Ruined,' he said. 'Almost brand new and fucking ruined.'

*

Meadhill got an email.

He was sat on the edge of the bath admiring his bandaging skills when he heard the ping.

If he was careful he could walk without limping.

He sat at his laptop and double-clicked on the image of a small envelope.

From: served.cold@anonimoose.com

Subject: Your imminent demise

Hello Meadhill you murdering monster. I know you are responsible for the death of my son and trust me when I tell you that this is just the beginning. You and

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your vile superiors are about to suffer beyond your wildest nightmares. The filth that run your precious organisation will soon wish they had never heard the name Roger Peerson and you will die with me laughing over your broken body.

You are scum.

Kind regards

Roger

The freak's alive, thought Meadhill, and that email is a minus one on the scary scale.

Meadhill clicked on 'reply'.

Subject: RE: Your imminent demise

Roger,

I'm so glad to hear you're still alive. I understand your anger but you have to believe me when I tell you I did not know the full extent of The Major's plans. In fact, when I found out about the plan to use your son as leverage and the failed kidnap attempt I got so angry that we fought and I ended up killing him.

Christ, I can't say that in an email. Scratch that last sentence.

I would never stoop so low as to use a child to manipulate someone. I do my job and that occasionally involves difficult decisions, granted, but it is always for the greater good and it only happens to those who deserve it.

Please contact me and let's get together and sort out our differences so we can move on. I don't like the thought of there being bad feeling between us.

John.

GARY BAKER

Meadhill deleted the subject line - *RE: Your imminent demise* - generated by the email program and changed it to: *Call me on 07571 555 555*. He clicked send. Damn. Forgot to do a spell check. Too late.

*

Roger read Meadhill's email.

Bad feeling, thought Roger. I'll show him bad feeling.

Chapter 24

Meadhill got another phone call.

The little screen read 'Andy M'.

Auntie M!

Meadhill looked at his watch. It had only been four hours for Christ's sake.

Meadhill flipped open the phone. 'It's only been four hours for Christ's sake.'

'We've been paid,' said Andy.

'I ...' Meadhill was at a loss.

'We now have two new commissions.'

'I'm really thrilled for you. What does it have to do with me?'

'The first is from your masters in The KOPALDA.'

'Oh, yes.' The bastards had gone around him. Just

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because he killed the fat Major?

'You have forty-eight hours to find Peerson and make him reverse the bank transactions.'

'I'm on top of that one,' said Meadhill. 'Peerson will be sorted. Though, quite why I have to report to you is beyond me.'

'Please,' hissed Andy. 'Please, fuck up with Peerson.'

'You'd like that wouldn't you, son.'

'And secondly,' Andy paused.

For effect? More than likely he was looking it up, the thick shit.

'Secondly, AZA On-line Gaming. A very nice man says you owe him a large amount of money, Meadhill.'

'A nice man?' Meadhill snorted. 'He's ... deranged.'

'Anyone who gives me two commissions in one visit is a nice man in my books.'

The line crackled its silence as Meadhill took this in.

'You have the same forty-eight hours, Meadhill. Then we're coming to get you.'

'I'll look forward to it.' Meadhill snapped shut his mobile phone and threw it onto the table next to his laptop.

'Fuckwit!'

Meadhill limped to the bathroom. Looked closely at himself in the mirror. Smiled to show his gold tooth.

'Peerson,' he said to his image. 'You're dead.'

Chapter 25

Roger realised his eyes were sore. Becky could do with a new monitor. He'd been staring unseeing at the files in his Yahoo briefcase, an area of computer storage accessible from anywhere on the Internet. Roger's secret depository.

The software Trojans were doing their job causing chaos with The KOPALDA's finances and Roger had thought he would feel better after sending those anonymous emails to Meadhill and the Major. But he didn't. He felt hollow.

Meadhill's reply sickened him.

A failed kidnap attempt. If Harry had lived he could have been a kidnap victim?

Roger's nausea came from frustrated anger.

But what could he really do, other than inflict financial chaos on them? The reality of it was that there was no way Roger could inflict any physical harm on anyone. It was just not in him and besides, they were professionals. They'd beat the crap out of him as soon as look at him. And after their bank accounts had been demolished they would undoubtedly have murder on their minds.

The telephone rang.

Should he answer it?

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People who knew Becky would know she was at work and so would not call. So it was probably Becky.

Roger lifted the receiver. 'Hello?'

'So you're still there.' It was Becky.

'Yes. I'm using your computer. I hope you don't mind. I was just checking my email and stuff.'

'No problem. Will you still be there when I get home?'

'I ...' Chloe purred on his lap. 'Chloe won't let me get up.'

'Good. There's some of mum's spag bol in the freezer. We can have that. Bye.' The line went dead. Roger replaced the receiver.

'Looks like I'm staying for dinner,' said Roger scratching Chloe behind the ears. She narrowed her eyes, lifted her chin and purred loudly.

Meadhill and The KOPALDA could wait. Roger felt tired. Nevertheless, he would make himself useful. When Becky returned Roger would be exhausted from ... he'd think of something. Something thoughtful, the carrying out of which would put in jeopardy, or at least have the potential to set back, his recovery. He could get the Hoover out, plug it in and place it in the middle of the floor and then sit down and, as Becky entered, he could be bravely trying to get to his feet, fighting through the pain, determined to do his bit and Hoover the carpet.

That would do it. Roger shut down the computer. Now what. What would stop me thinking? TV.

*

Roger woke to a loud clattering and an exclamation from

the kitchen, 'Shit!'

His neck was sore and a fog was slow to lift from his mind. The television was off. He'd been watching the news. Another hurricane had devastated parts of Florida. It had occurred to Roger that a tiny, inexpensive pressure and temperature sensor could be incorporated in every mobile phone. During each communication with a base station, the data could be stored for later analysis. The last thing Roger remembered thinking was: what a stupid idea. Then he must have fallen asleep.

That was Becky's voice cursing in the kitchen. So much for the deception designed to elicit sympathy. She'd returned home from a hard day's nursing to find him snoring in front of the telly.

Roger knew that if Harry had been there to hug him he would have complained about his dad's bad breath.

'You alright?' called Roger getting slowly to his feet.

'Just dropped a spoon.'

Becky was stirring the contents of a couple of steaming pots sat on the gas hob. She had changed into jeans and a black T-shirt. Her bottom waggled as she energetically stirred the contents of one of the pots. Roger leaned against the kitchen doorframe watching her. She looked small. Her flip-flops let Roger see the remains of a light tan gently staining her feet and ankles. Contrasting attractively with the white areas between her toes and under the curve of her heel. No veins. Nice feet.

'Sorry I woke you.'

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'No problem,' said Roger. 'I must have dozed off,' he added unnecessarily.

'To be expected,' said Becky, turning and holding a wooden spoon heaped with a small sample of steaming sauce. 'Hope you like chillies,' she said taking a taste and cupping her other hand under the spoon's bowl to catch any drips.

'Love them.'

The conversation continued awkwardly. Staccato.

The spaghetti bolognese was served with an 'impertinent Merlot'.

Becky asked, 'How can a wine be impertinent?'

Roger took a deep breath. 'This Merlot,' he held the glass level with his eyes, 'takes scant regard for any other sensations caressing my taste buds. It crashes through, assaulting my mouth left, right and centre, caring little for the careful constructions, the jigsaws, the dodecahedrons of supporting flavours I've carefully composed in order to extract the maximum amount of enjoyment from your mother's creation.'

Becky summarised. 'It's okay, then.'

'Yes,' said Roger.

It wasn't very witty. It wasn't very funny. But it was enough. It signalled willingness. Willingness to recognise that there was 'something' there. They liked each other.

They drank and flirted and eventually, leaning hesitantly forward, kissed.

Roger's first serious kiss since his wife, Jennifer, had died.

Ten years. Ten dry years. What about Heather, the stocking-top girl? Oh, yes. But that was different. This was ... normal.

Everything felt new and in atomic detail. Jennifer's waist was narrow and firm. The base of her back was exquisitely curved and her spine well-muscled. Soft lips, hot wet tongue, the zinc edge to her saliva which signalled her sexual arousal, all so new and alien and exciting!

'And guess what,' said Becky surfacing from a long kiss.

'What?' Roger realised that 'What?' was the only thought in his head. No comments from Rogers B and C. Nothing. They were silent. Roger frowned ... wondering.

'It's not serious,' said Becky, tapping Roger lightly on his nose. 'It's my day off tomorrow.'

What was she implying? That she could have a lie in? Stay up late and ...

'And I can't believe I'm doing this,' said Becky. 'I must be drunk.' She kissed Roger once more and held out her hand for him to follow. Which he did. Awkwardly. Up the narrow stairs.

Injury forgotten: Roger threw off his clothes; undressed Becky, giggling, on the bed; lowered himself carefully onto her. Kissing. Nibbling. Caressing. Sliding into her while she gasped gently against his neck, holding him tight. It felt so right. He felt so big in her, in control. Becky moaned and urged at his buttocks with her heels. This was not like Jennifer. Different. But still right.

*

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Roger lay on his back, hands behind his head, not focusing on the ceiling. Becky breathed gently and rhythmically beside him.

Things were going well. Becky and her little black and white house would be very useful. He could avoid going home and possibly bumping into Julia or the KOPALDA nut-cases indefinitely. The plan was working. Is it really a plan or just series of events pointing at a preferred outcome? Anyway, she hadn't a clue ... But Becky is really nice. I mean really. She's cute and sexy and sane and easy going and down to earth and funny and ... did I say sexy?

Roger turned to look at the curve of Becky's cheek and the long, dark eyelashes that rested on them. Something reached into his chest and squeezed his heart.

*

By the evening of the following day, Becky's day off, they had made love five more times and between them consumed three, four-cheese pizzas with extra chillies and six bottles of Stella. Becky had at last repaired to the bathroom and Roger, wrapped in the smelly duvet, had signed onto the computer and called up his Yahoo account to check his email.

Shortly afterwards, hearing Becky exit the bathroom, Roger rushed in to use the loo.

*

Becky, enveloped in an oversized white towel dressing gown, with thoughts of checking her own hotmail account, sat in front of Roger's home page. Right there in front of her was the name John Meadhill. This

was a new name to her but one that as associated with Roger. A friend of Roger's? A work mate?

The link with John Meadhill's name was to an email whose subject was *Call me on 07571 555 555*. Easy to remember number, thought Becky.

And she was right because she remembered it later.

Becky's thoughts turned back to her email so she closed Roger's home page and logged onto her Hotmail account.

*

That night, Roger did not sleep well. His tossing and turning kept Becky awake. At one point Roger sat bolt upright shouting for Harry.

Becky knew that Harry was Roger's son who'd been killed in a car accident. But Becky still worried about Roger. Wondered about his past and any family or friends that would be worried about him too. Wondered who Roger really was. Deep down.

She had jumped in with both feet. A patient she hardly knew. A mistake? Perhaps. But he was very kind, gentle and seemed genuine. Though obviously injured, wounded by more than a mugger.

The next day, during Becky's lunch break, the telephone number came back to her. John somebody. A friend? Certainly sounded like it. Maybe he could tell her a little more about Roger and his family. Maybe pass on that Roger was well.

Becky went to the pay phones next to the small shop in outpatients and dialled the number. Two rings. Becky felt uncertain. This was a strange thing to do. Four

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rings. No there's no one there. Silly idea anyway. She should hang up.

'What!' said a gruff male voice.

'Hello.' Becky felt strangely nervous. 'I'm sorry to bother you is that John? Roger Peerson's friend?'

Silence. And after what seemed an age to Becky the voice came back saying, 'Who is this?'

Becky took a deep breath and spoke quickly. 'Hi. My name's Becky Ketteringham. I'm Roger's ... well friend I suppose, and I saw your number on one of Roger's emails and I was just wondering ...' What was she wondering?

'How is the old sod?'

'He's well. Physically he's well. But I'm a little worried about his ... happiness, I suppose.'

'Why what's wrong? Has he gone downhill again?'

'I don't know about "again",' said Becky, 'but he certainly avoids talking about the past and isn't - doesn't seem to be sleeping well. I was just wondering if you were, or knew of any, family. I imagine they'd be worried. I'm fairly certain he hasn't been in touch with anyone for quite a while now.'

'Yes, I'm glad you called,' said John. 'Where are you?'

'I'm in the hospital.'

'Roger's in hospital? Which hospital?'

'No, I'm a nurse, I work here. Roger's back at home.'

'Back at your home?'

'Yes.'

GARY BAKER

Becky waited feeling slightly foolish.

Eventually John said, 'I'm sorry, I was just thinking. You haven't told Roger you called me have you?'

'No.'

'Probably for the best right now. I tell you what ...'

Another pause. Becky broke the silence. 'Yes?'

'How about you and I get together, have a chat and so on and maybe see what we can come up with. What do you think?'

'Umm. Well ...'

'Where exactly are you?'

Becky felt slightly uneasy but not to tell would seem rude. 'Darlington Memorial Hospital.'

'No problem. What time do you get off?'

'Six.'

'Good I'll meet you outside. Tell you what. I'll even wear a red carnation. How's that?'

It was one of Roger's friends, and she had initiated the call, so it was bound to be alright. 'Okay,' said Becky.

'Six then?'

'Okay. Bye.' Becky replaced the receiver. She should have found out more about this John character. Still, he sounded genuine enough and he didn't know what she looked like so if he looked dodgy ... anyway, she would find out at six.

*

Meadhill flipped shut his mobile phone. So the little shit was still alive. And back in his home town.

Within thirty minutes Meadhill was behind the

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wheel of a fully fuelled black Mercedes humming north along the M1. He looked at a red carnation on the seat beside him and up to the clock on the dashboard. It blinked 13:45 at him. It's about two hundred and fifty miles to Darlington if memory serves. At seventy miles an hour that's about three and something hours. Let's say four. That'll make it seventeen forty-five by the time I get there. Assuming no delays. Too close. Better up the average speed.

Meadhill set the cruise control to eighty-five and settled back.

Okay, we have four hours. Need a plan. Need to get Peerson to come to me. Otherwise he'll get spooked. Need to control the situation.

He caught sight of his own eye in the rear view mirror and moved his head to the left so he could see more of his face. Grey, almost white hair, dark eyebrows, and almost black eyes narrowed to reflect his grim determination. Good looking bloke. Those few wrinkles and the grey hair really look pretty damn good, if I say so myself.

*

Four hours after showing himself his gold tooth in the rear view mirror of the black Mercedes, Meadhill pushed a pound coin into the pay and display machine of Darlington Memorial Hospital's car park.

He placed the ticket on the dashboard, took the red carnation from the passenger seat, locked the car and went to wait outside the outpatient's entrance. He could see his tall athletic figure in the tinted glass of the

automatic doors. The red carnation stood out like a gunshot wound against his all black attire. Stylish, thought Meadhill. White hair suits me.

He did not have to stand and endure the stupid, dirty hoi polloi who lurched in and out of this temple to diseases and all that was contagious for very long.

Why was it always the same people in hospitals? Why did they all dress in filthy grey clothes, have wispy, greasy hair and most of the old biddies had moustaches a Greek taxi driver would be proud of. They were all so grubby and ... ill looking. Who in their right mind would want to work in such a place filled with air breathed by these barely human bags of garbage?

And suddenly a short, pretty hospital worker in stained white coveralls was waving and jogging towards him.

'John?' she called, obviously unconscious of the way her breasts moved under her uniform.

Meadhill replace the curled lip of contempt with a bright smile.

'Becky? Hello. Was just thinking how ... rewarding it must be to work in a place such as this.'

'Really?'

Had she picked up his insincerity? No. He was too good.

She was short. Short was sexy.

'I noticed a pub on the way in,' said Meadhill. 'The Otter and Fish. Perhaps we could have a ... chat there?'

'Sounds good,' said Becky.

They agreed to take both cars and meet in the bar.

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In his car, Meadhill set the alarm function on his mobile phone for ten minutes time.

*

Meadhill had a Bell's whisky with ice and Becky accepted a diet coke.

'There you go,' said Meadhill, placing her coke in front of her and sitting down. He noticed Becky had small hands lightly stained with the remains of a tan. He watched as she gripped the straight sided tumbler and raised it halfway to her lips.

'Thanks, John,' said Becky. 'I meant to ask, how do you know Roger?'

Meadhill had used his four hours of driving time to prepare himself. But it did depend on what Peerson had told sexy little nurse.

'We first met in the support group, shortly after Roger's first ... breakdown,' said Meadhill, nonchalantly taking a sip from his whisky. 'That must have been, let me see, about eight years ago. Though I'm not much good with dates.'

'Oh.'

'You sound disappointed,' said Meadhill.

'No, no. Not at all. I was just hoping you would be related in some way.' Becky's lips were moist from the diet coke and Meadhill could just make out the tips of her perfect white teeth as she spoke.

'No, not related,' he said. 'Though we did become good friends. I kind of ... stuck by him during some of his worse times.'

'You mentioned a breakdown?'

'Yes, after his wife died - Jennifer I think her name was, yes, Jennifer - he felt responsible. And then when Harry was killed in a similar way ...' Meadhill took another sip. Tried to gauge the little nurse's reactions. 'You know it's Roger's birthday in a few days - though he'll probably deny it.'

'Is it?'

'Yes.' Meadhill sipped his whisky. 'You haven't ... mentioned me have you?'

'No.'

'Oh, good. In that case I was thinking about a surprise birthday party. It really did the trick last time.' Meadhill chuckled, ostensibly to himself.

'Oh, really?' said Becky. 'That might be a bit ...'

'Overwhelming? I know what you mean, but Roger's just a lad at heart - aren't we all - and it really brought him out of himself last time. Really did the trick.'

Becky looked uncertain.

Meadhill continued, 'I'd organise everything of course. Surround him with friends, loved ones.'

'Well ...'

'You'd have to keep schtum, of course. Mum's the word, as they say.'

'Yes.'

'Good. I can't wait to see the look on the old sod's face.' Meadhill relaxed. He was in control. The sexy little nurse was walking on eggshells and didn't want to put a foot wrong. She didn't want to delve too deep, just yet, into what was obviously a very sensitive past.

'Roger has a lot of friends in the area,' said

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Meadhill, 'and I was thinking about a venue.'

Becky took a breath. 'Do you really think a party is the best thing for Roger right now?'

'Without a doubt,' he said, dismissing Becky's question with a wave. 'I was thinking,' Meadhill took another sip of his whisky, 'Roger loves planes and flying, as you probably know ...'

Becky took a sip of her diet coke, said nothing.

Those small, pretty hands gripped the straight, shaft of the glass tumbler like - Meadhill dragged his mind back to the conversation. '... so I'll arrange a band, drinks, buffet, the lot, at the Teesside Flight Club's hangar out at the airport. The guys there all know me.'

Becky's eye's widened.

Meadhill responded quickly to her look of alarm. 'And,' he said, oozing enthusiasm, leaning forward and placing a hand on Becky's sleeve, making sure to avoid touching her skin. 'I can get a special deal on a test flight in one of their Learjet 23s. Roger will love it! So after he's had ... a little play in the jet, you can go for a spin too of course, we can have a few drinks, bite to eat, bit of a party. What do you say? It'll be great. You'll meet the crowd.'

Becky took another sip of diet coke. Taking it in.

Her eyes defocused, lips slightly parted, white teeth just in view.

'All *you* have to do.' Meadhill's stress of 'you' made Becky focus on his face. 'All *you* have to do is get Roger to Teesside airport, the Flight Club - it's signposted at the airport - by say, seven thirty tomorrow night. Gives me,

well my secretary, all day to get things organised.'

In Meadhill's pocket, the alarm function on his phone kicked the device into an insistent beeping. He pulled out the mobile, silenced it with his thumb and looked at the screen with some distress.

'Damn,' he said, thinking his timing of the alarm had turned out to be pretty near perfect. 'I'm going to have to dash. Looks like a problem at work.' Meadhill stood and before Becky could ask anything further said, 'Nice to meet you Becky. Call me if there are any ... problems, otherwise I'll see you tomorrow night. Good luck keeping it a secret, too.' He gave Becky a conspiratorial wink. She smiled weakly and held her glass with both hands.

'Okay,' she managed. 'Bye.'

Meadhill waved and left Becky all the while pretending to prod at his mobile phone anxiously. Feeble-minded, sexy little nurse should deliver Mister Roger fucking Peerson right to me. Tonight would have been better but don't want to push the little dear too hard. Quite a delicious little mouth on her though. Might have a use for that after I've dealt with his nibs.

Chapter 26

Meadhill needed a hotel. He'd driven past a sign on the way into Darlington. The sign stood at a gap in an eight feet high sandstone wall. It was an entrance hung with two, wide open, wrought iron gates large enough for two cars to pass through. He'd glimpsed manicured lawns, a golf course perhaps, and a winding driveway leading to a building that looked like it might once have been an aristocrat's home. A stately home made from the same beige sandstone as the eight feet barrier circling its grounds.

This turned out to be the Moat Corner Hotel and yes, they had rooms available.

Would sir be eating in the dining room that evening? Dinner will be served from seven thirty until nine o'clock.

'No. I'll be eating out.'

'Very good, sir.' The grey suited receptionist snapped her small, almost childlike fingers, gesturing to a lanky youth dressed like an undertaker with no jacket.

Meadhill waved him away from his bag, not taking his eyes off the receptionist's hands as she took down his room key from the hook. He touched her pale, slender

fingers as she handed it to him. She had said the room number but her words had not penetrated his thoughts while he replayed the cool interaction between his skin and hers.

It didn't matter, the number was stamped on the key ring and the lanky youth waited, poised to show Meadhill the way.

Every inch of floor was covered with pale green carpet. Stairs where shallow and creaky. Walls were covered with all manner of pictures. None of them originals.

In his room, Meadhill tossed the lanky youth a pound coin then shut the door with his foot.

He hung up his black clothes, thought about closing the curtains, left them open and stripped to shower pausing to admire himself in the full length mirror. Once lathered up, Meadhill thought about masturbating but decided to save himself for later.

'Tomorrow will be a good day,' he said out loud. 'Tonight we play.'

The pale receptionist with the small hands organised a taxi.

'Where do you recommend I go,' Meadhill asked the taxi driver, 'to have a ... really good time?'

'You'd have to stay away from my house, that's for sure,' said the driver. 'What you after?'

'Good food, good drink, good company,' said Meadhill, after a moment's thought. The phrase triggered a memory in Meadhill. He had been a youth. Eighteen. There had been him and five of his friends. They were on

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shore leave in Cape Town walking along Long Street, one of the main streets running through the town centre. It was about nine at night. The chatty group had come upon a young coloured girl. In those days the South Africans referred to mix race people in the Cape as coloureds. In England, at the time, the term was half-caste.

So it goes.

The pretty young girl was nattily dressed and sported an Afro haircut, considered the height of fashion at that time.

'Hello Bubbles,' said Meadhill, demonstrating his bravado for the other's benefit more than for the young lady. It turned out she was no shrinking violet and was probably high on marijuana and booze and, more than likely, a prostitute. She chatted easily with the group. One of the lads was not with the crew but was staying in the YMCA close by. Someone suggested she should let them smuggle her into the YMCA and into the lad's room where there was a hidden stash of Castle Lager. She was game and Meadhill's next memory was of being stuffed into a tiny room with five other young men with the effervescent Bubbles holding court on the narrow single bed.

Several bottles of Castle Lager later and they were discussing who, if she had the choice, would she have sex with. She looked round and pointed at Meadhill.

Flattered and repulsed he said, 'You should be so lucky, Bubbles.' She laughed and took her top off. Extraordinarily, and the cause of much hilarity among the

group, Bubbles had two round, red, fifty-per-cent-off stickers, covering her nipples. Meadhill couldn't resist them. And saying, 'This is going to hurt you a lot more than it's going to hurt me,' ripped off one of the stickers. Bubbles laughed uproariously. Meadhill laughed and looked round the group. One of the lad's faces caught his attention.

He was blonde, blue eyed and probably the shortest in the group. He was well spoken and seemed quite bright. His name was Peter or Paul – something beginning with P - Meadhill could not recall. But the look on his face silenced Meadhill's laughs like a needle being dragged across a record.

The lad's pale blue eyes were transfixed by the sight of Bubbles naked breast. His teeth were bared into a humourless, animal grin. His back was bent forward and his shoulders hunched. The look of barely controlled lust on the lad's face offended Meadhill to his very core. To show such weakness, to allow this display of raw, naked, wanting, to such an extent as to allow others to see your thoughts in all their crudeness and vile intimacy was just unbearable. Animals displayed like this. Not men.

Meadhill left in disgust pretending he needed the toilet. He found out later that Bubbles had been bedded by one of the others. Not Peter or Paul or whatever his name was. The 'lucky' lad, who Meadhill could barely remember, had used the phrase, 'Good drink, good shag, good night,' when relaying the story the next day.

The taxi driver's words brought Meadhill back from his reverie.

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'Say no more,' he said manoeuvring his black and yellow Toyota Corolla Taxi along the dark, winding hotel drive. The headlights picked out rough hewn boulders laid at intervals of twenty or so feet along the drive which Meadhill had not noticed when he'd arrived.

Must stay sharp!

When they reached the main road, the taxi turned left towards the lights of Darlington. They passed groups of young people heading out for the night. Eschewing coats or jackets, girls folded their arms and young men thrust their hands deep into their pockets as defence against the cold night breezes.

The taxi eventually pulled up outside a warmly lit restaurant. The window frames were British Racing Green and a sign, painted in gold, on the window proudly announced 'Verde Bros Sardinian Restaurant'.

'You can get a decent value meal in there,' said the driver pointing to the restaurant, 'and when you're done you can cross over the road to this place here.' The driver motioned to a purple brick building with a double glass door and neon signs showing cocktail glasses being filled up from a Champagne bottle.

'Thanks,' said Meadhill. The meter said three pounds twenty-five. He motioned to the neon signed with a twenty pound note. 'What time does it close?'

'Two,' said the driver looking at the twenty pound note in his rear view mirror.

Meadhill placed the note on the driver's shoulder. 'I'll see you here at two then.' And, slowly reading the license on the dashboard continued, 'Trent, Robert,

Three, seven, seven, nine.'

Meadhill didn't wait for confirmation, he left the car and headed for the restaurant.

Inside, a short, dark, acne scarred man with a smile fixed by habit showed Meadhill to a small table at the rear. Meadhill ignored him opting for a large table set for four in the window.

'I'll have a Bell's with ice,' said Meadhill sitting down and, not waiting for a menu, added, 'And a rare, peppered, fillet steak. Throw on some vegetables as well.'

'Of course, sir.' The restaurateur cleared away the three extraneous place settings and, before getting the whisky, went into the kitchen and passed on the order verbally to his brother, the chef, adding, 'Assicurisi che è perfetto.' Make sure it's perfect.

Gavino Verde need not have worried about this intimidating stranger. He was right to surmise that the man in black sitting in his window was not a man to be messed with. But what he did not know was that Meadhill did not care what his food tasted like. As long as it was a half decent steak and the vegetables were not rotten it was food. And food was not to be relished. It was a necessity. Eating was a duty performed in the cause of good health, strong teeth and energy.

There were many more things in life to be relished, and it was some of these things that went through Meadhill's mind as he methodically chewed on his steak.

The stupid, sexy nurse had played straight into his hands. Peerson would be coming to him the next night. It would be no problem to persuade the freak to put his

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software bunnies into reverse and have them return the money. He would enjoy convincing Peerson that it would be far, far better to cooperate with him than resist. That would be fun.

And when that little job was done he could give himself a little reward. The nurse. It would be easy to hold her down with one hand. Judging by the way her mouth parted when she talked she'd probably enjoy it anyway. She'd be screaming for him in no time. The little tart would be too pleased to die with him inside her. Convulsing and squeezing and jerking her little life away.

'- sir?'

Meadhill looked up at Gavino's pockmarked face.

'What?'

'Anything else, sir? A coffee perhaps?'

'Yes. Coffee. Black.'

'Thank you, sir.'

Meadhill looked through the window across the street to the nightclub entrance. From this angle Meadhill could see the sign above the shiny black double doors read, 'Le piège de souris'.

Meadhill translated: The trap of mouse. The mousetrap? A trifle pretentious for Darlington, don't you think?

People were starting to queue to get in. They looked very young. He would be a man among boys.

*

In the context of a nightclub, Meadhill is attracted by, and attractive to, a very easily identifiable female type. The type is defined almost completely by the way the girl

looks: old enough to get into the establishment, appears younger than twenty-five, plenty of tanned flesh on display, blonde or brunette, red lips, white teeth, good figure, not ugly. Add an unmistakable attitude of availability and the picture is complete.

Two young ladies standing at the bar inside the club glanced at each other as Meadhill walked tall into view. The blonde wore a short black sleeveless dress. The brunette wore a similar silver number. Both garments clung like paint. Lips were red; limbs were tanned and bangled; and hair was big.

Mirroring each other's movements like a pair of sleek dolphins, they picked up their Pina Coladas, looked into each other's eyes, pursed their red lips around their respective straws and sucked, all the while gently tapping a heel in time to the thudding music piped from the dance floor in the adjoining space.

Meadhill stopped briefly when he saw them. Stood legs apart pulling gently at his lapels and smiled. The gold from his tooth shining a beam to herald his arrival.

He approached, arms outstretched, encompassing and inviting them both to share in him, to partake of his irresistible manliness.

Boys dressed as men stood back and ducked their heads with respect for this real male, this fearless conqueror entering that dread region of dry mouths, fumbling words and humbling blushes to harvest the treasures they could only lay back in their sticky beds and dream of.

The communication between Meadhill and the

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girls was communication at its purest level. All parties knew each other, recognised the spirit within and allowed themselves to be dissolved into the solution of three.

Meadhill smiled and complimented the girls, letting them see his fat wallet while he paid for the house's best bottle of Champagne. In returned they turned up their chins and laughed at his quips, brushed their firm breasts, hips and thighs against him, tossed their hair and exchanged unveiled knowing glances with each other from under over-manicured eyebrows.

They were his and he was theirs to the exclusion of all others.

When people know the desires of others and don't disguise their own needs, it seemed - to the boy-men and others outside pretending not to watch the triangle - that life could be a whole lot simpler, and a whole lot sweeter.

And they danced and drank and sang until some blind hand brushed their wings ... a face on the other side of the dance floor. Andy M? The contractor! Dear God! I'm full of alcohol! Unprepared!

No, it was just some local. Not even a close resemblance, now I look properly. Besides, I have plenty of time.

Though I *am* tired. Ready for some sex. Time to go.

The taxi was waiting outside. The driver shooed away others drunkenly demanding to be taken home and held the door open as Meadhill and his two new friends collapsed giggling into the back seat.

*

Andy M was waiting for Meadhill in his hotel room. He had made himself comfortable in a soft armchair, facing the door, his back to the window. He sipped the whisky he had poured himself from the mini-bar and listened as Meadhill struggled to make the unfamiliar key unlock the reluctant door. Rattling key, shuddering door, soft masculine curses, girlish giggles.

Andy M grew impatient. Was this clown the same person he'd heard so much about? The great and dangerous John Meadhill, spoken of with such awe? He'd taken him in the warehouse. The roundhouse stab and been slow and telegraphed. He'd take him again. Now.

Andy M's muscles propelled his bulk from the chair and across the room to the door with the grace and speed of a black leopard. He grabbed the polished brass handle and pulled open the door standing slightly to one side in case Meadhill got taken by surprise and was dragged into the room.

Meadhill's .45 automatic pointed unwaveringly at Andy M's left eye from eighteen inches away.

Andy M noticed two things: the very tip of the barrel was slightly fuzzy, he had the urge to lean back slightly to bring it into focus; Meadhill's finger on the trigger was not out of focus and he could see quite clearly that the flesh was white as the pressure Meadhill exerted pushed the blood away from the skin's surface.

Andy M then came to two conclusions: he needed new contact lenses; Meadhill was not a clown and Andy would probably die if he tried to grab his arm.

Silently, Meadhill backed him into the room until

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Andy M's calf muscles came into contact with the chair he had recently vacated.

Andy M stopped moving backwards.

'Sit,' said Meadhill.

Andy M sat down slowly, relaxed and picked up the whisky glass he'd left on the side table by the chair and casually took a sip.

The girls had vanished.

With the gun continuing to point unwaveringly at Andy M's left eye, Meadhill walked backwards until he reached the hotel room door. He kicked it shut.

'You frightened away my ... friends,' said Meadhill.

'Think you could have managed two, do you?' Andy M replaced the whisky glass on the table adding, 'At your age, Sergeant?'

'Explain to me why I shouldn't kill you.' Meadhill sucked excess saliva through his teeth.

*

Andy M said, 'My orders are to find out how close your are to resolving the Peerson problem.'

Meadhill believed him. Believed that was the only reason he was there. The subtext, which he thought Andy M would be oblivious to, was to apply pressure. If he'd been intent on killing him there had been plenty of opportunities from the time he entered the hotel. He tucked his gun back under his arm.

'I have a ... meeting set up with Peerson tomorrow night,' said Meadhill.

'What makes you think he'll turn up?'

'Oh, he'll turn up alright. Don't you worry about

that. He knows I can ... bring pressure to bear on his girlfriend. He won't risk that.'

'Where are you meeting him?'

Meadhill narrowed his eyes at Andy M. The man's tone was getting irritating. There was no respect in his voice. Or his eyes. Maybe he should just take the fuckwit out right now. But if he did the consequences could be even more irritating. The KOPALDA would simply unleash a whole pack of Andy M's on him. End of story. 'Teesside airport,' he said. 'Don't get any ideas.'

Andy M stood, buttoned his black jacket. 'I just do what I'm paid to do,' he said, walking past Meadhill and out of the hotel room.

Chapter 27

Roger had managed to coax Becky's washing machine and drier into cleaning his clothes. Her iron was awkward to use but he seemed to get better results than with his own. Was somebody else's iron always better? Like greener grass.

It was just about time for Becky to be arriving home from work and Roger had the delivered pizzas keeping warm in the oven.

Altogether a successful day.

When Becky eventually arrived Roger had to hold himself in check as his instincts were to behave like an excited puppy, hopping about, pawing at her and demanding attention and encouragement. Look what I've done. Aren't I clever, aren't I? Aren't I?

He felt a little embarrassed at the tone of his own voice when he shared his successful washing experience and pizza ordering with Becky. But Becky, God love her, though distracted, probably tired, didn't stoop to patronising him. Her day at the hospital had undoubtedly involved numerous life and death decisions, after all.

Becky changed into her jeans and T-shirt, went back down stairs and hugged Roger, putting the side of

her face against his chest.

'Ooh, I'm glad you're here when I get home,' she said, her voice muffled. She pulled back her head, looked up at Roger. 'But what about your house? Shouldn't you check to see if everything is alright?'

Roger pulled back from the hug. 'Yes,' he said. 'I'll go tomorrow.'

'You won't be late back though, will you?'

The concern in Becky's voice made Roger arch his eyebrows.

'No. Why?'

Becky pulled Roger towards her and buried her head in his chest so he could not see her face. 'I thought I'd make something nice for us to eat. As it's Friday.'

'You're rubbish at that,' laughed Roger.

'What do you mean?' Becky looked up at Roger once more, flushing attractively.

'You're sick of pizza and you know that I've cleverly managed to burn the takeaway so you want to make sure you get a decent meal tomorrow evening.'

Becky pushed her face into Roger's chest. 'Something like that,' she mumbled.

*

Roger and Becky ate the chewy, overcooked pizza in silence.

'Look at us,' said Roger, 'like an old married couple.' There was something on Becky's mind. Or perhaps she's just tired.

'It's me,' said Becky. 'It's been a bit of a hectic day at work.'

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'That's alright. I once got a lift when I was hitchhiking from Cape Town to Johannesburg – you couldn't do *that* anymore – anyway, I got a lift from a man in a bright yellow Volkswagen Beetle. He said, something to the effect that,' Roger put on a thick South African accent, "You know, some people just can't sit in silence, they always have to be yapping. Sitting not talking to you has been a real pleasure, my boy." I was never sure how to take that.'

Becky smiled. 'You've travelled then?'

'A little.'

'Is that how you met Harry's mother?'

Roger was a little taken aback. 'What do you mean?' came out of his mouth while his mind readjusted to talking about Jennifer with Becky.

'Nothing. I don't mean to pry but I understand Jennifer died. That must have been difficult.'

A sledgehammer hit Roger's mind causing a familiar fracturing sensation. Roger was blank, dumbfounded. Roger B said, come on boy, snap out of it. Roger C, screamed in his mind, she knows, she's one of them. She's one of *them*!

Roger swallowed hard. 'How did you know about Jennifer?' Don't give the game away you fool. Don't let her know you know she's one of them. 'I never - I don't recall mentioning Jennifer to you before.'

'No?' Becky blushed realising she had made a mistake. Or was it a mistake? 'No. You're right. I've spoken to a friend of yours.'

'Friend?' She's one of them! Don't believe her.

'John.'

'John?'

'John Meadhill. You and him met in a support group after Jennifer died? You can talk about this can't you?'

She's very good. She sounds genuine.

Roger's face had frozen. Becky put down her knife and fork, leaned forward placing her hand on Roger's.

'I was worried about you,' she said. 'For some reason that telephone number stuck in my mind.'

'Telephone number?'

It seemed to Roger that a huge distance had suddenly and violently come between them. He had starburst, gone to warp speed, hyper-jumped light years away in the blink of an eye. This smoky shell, the tiny pupils, this ethereal facsimile of Roger was all that was left. Becky was frightened. The words tumbled from her, 'It was the title or subject or whatever of an email you'd left open on my computer and I was so worried about you. You haven't been in contact with any friends or family haven't even been home and I was worried you were bottling things up and I'm sorry but when I called John he seemed so nice and genuinely concerned about you and when I heard you'd been through this before when Jennifer died and how they'd pulled you out of it I didn't argue and now the surprise is gone which probably isn't such a bad thing really. I never was happy with springing that on you but we can pretend and I'm sure you'll have a good time and there is something which you will really like. I won't tell you that so there will still be a surprise ...

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Roger?'

'You called him? You called John Meadhill?' She was serious. She wasn't one of them. She was an innocent. A tidal bore of relief surged through Roger; Becky was genuine. Cling to that thought, said Roger B, while Meadhill puts a bullet through your head.

Roger zoomed back, the ethereal became solid. He moved his hand from beneath Becky's and placed both his hands on top of hers. Looked deep into her eyes. My God, she's beautiful.

'Ask me what's the square root of something.'

'What?' Becky gave her head the tiniest of shakes.

'Ask me what the *cube* root of something is.'

'Why? ... what?'

'Go on, ask me.'

'Okay,' said Becky as if talking to a child, 'what's the cube root of one hundred?'

'Four point six four one five eight eight blah blah. Yes!' Roger punched the air.

'I don't understand.'

Roger became stern again. 'You have to tell me everything, Becky,' he said with an earnestness that was almost comical in its severity. 'Did you tell Meadhill where you live?'

'No.'

'What is the surprise you mentioned?'

'It's a surprise party, at a flying club. Teesside airport. I -'

'Listen to me,' Roger interrupted, holding Becky's eyes with his own, daring her to blink. 'Meadhill is a very

dangerous man. He belongs to an organised crime gang called The KOPALDA. He is a killer. They are the ones responsible for my son's death. They recruited me to do some of their dirty work for them.' Roger looked down. Ashamed. 'I was ... turned. Becky, I've done some very bad things. I used to work for the government. I ... I'm a cryptographer. A code breaker. But I did have problems. Harry's death pushed me over ... I've not been well. Meadhill is a killer. You have to believe that. Tell me everything. Please.'

A few short sentences had changed this man before her into an incomprehensible alien. Code breaker? But there was no doubting his tone.

Becky told Roger about her conversation with Meadhill; the surprise birthday party at the Flight Club at Teesside airport, the flight in a Learjet, all Roger's friends would be there.

'And you definitely didn't tell him where you live?' asked Roger when Becky had finished.

'No, but he knows where I work.'

Okay. This was serious. There was no way Roger could take on Meadhill and the rest of The KOPALDA without help. The police? Roger remembered the Captain bragging about how far The KOPALDA had infiltrated that establishment. The police would be no help. Which left Julia. Julia and her organisation. An organisation of code breaking stiff, or so Roger had thought until she had turned up at Blackpool with an honest to goodness goon in tow. Roger knew he could still be very useful to Julia. There had to be certain guarantees though.

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*

'Where are you, Roger?' where Julia's first words when he called her. This time he told her.

'Darlington,' he said.

'At home?'

'No. With a friend.' He could hear the lower frequencies of men's voices in the background.

'Oh. How are you getting on, Roger?'

'I've been in hospital.'

'Hospital? What happened?'

'I ...' Why hesitate. If he wanted Julia's help he had to come clean. Dangle his returning savant gifts as bait. '... I was shot.' The line was very quiet. Too quiet. The quiet of a line when someone puts their hand over the receiver. 'But I'm okay. Just a bit sore. Nothing vital damaged. Are you there?'

Roger heard the background noise come back down the line. There was a catch in Julia's voice. She sounded really concerned, trying hard to keep her voice level.

'I'm glad to hear that, Roger.' She was back in full control. 'Now, what can I do for you?'

All those years and it comes down to 'what can I do for you?'

'Julia, I need your help. The KOPALDA, the people who I did some work for; one of their killers has found us.'

'Us?'

'Me. Found me, and I'm afraid he's going to kill me.'

GARY BAKER

'I don't think I can help you, Roger.'

She's refusing to help me. After all that work. All those years.

'I set some system traps and bugged about with their bank accounts.'

'Yes,' said Julia. 'You were always very talented at that. But I'm afraid -'

'I have something that you may be interested in, Julia.'

'Roger, you must understand, the department -'

'Ask me what's the square root of five thousand four hundred and thirty-two.'

The line was quiet.

'Ask me, Julia, go on'

'You could have memorised it.'

'Then test me. Ask me any number. Anything.'

The line was quiet again. Roger felt Julia's belief swimming along the dark telephone lines towards him.

It was impossible to fake so why pretend.

'Stay where you are and we'll come and get you.'

'No, wait,' said Roger. 'There's one more thing. You have to help me get rid of this Meadhill killer and close down The KOPALDA otherwise I'll never be free. I don't intend to spend the rest of my life looking over my shoulder.' Roger went on to describe Becky's meeting with Meadhill and the plans to meet at the Flight Club at Teesside airport.

'I will still have to test you,' said Julia after a brief pause.

'Come now then,' said Roger. 'Test me tonight or

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tomorrow morning because tomorrow night is when I'll know where the lunatic Meadhill is.'

'Very well,' agreed Julia. 'What's your number?'

*

Julia replaced the receiver very carefully and looked at the number she had just written on her pad. Roger's words swirled around her head liked a flock of disturbed starlings refusing to settle. It was the word 'us' that kept banging like a firecracker making all the other thoughts leap squawking into the air. 'one of the killers has found *us*.'

'Us' - an ugly, selfish, squat little word.

Roger was with someone. With someone enough to call themselves 'us'. It was a girl. She just knew it. He'd found a replacement for Jennifer. Away from me he'd healed. He was whole again.

Julia stood looking at the receiver as her thoughts slowed and coalesced. The voices of her two assistants, arguing over an Arabic translation brought her out of her reverie.

She straightened her back, pushed back her shoulders. 'Roger is back online,' she said interrupting her assistants' argument.

'Peerson?' said the taller of the two dark haired men.

'Yes. We'll need to mobilise. Now.'

Her two assistants ran to her sides like Labradors eager to fetch a stick.

*

Becky was determined not to cry as she paced the living

room.

Roger sat as calm as he was able. Chloe sat purring on his lap. Blofeld never had these problems.

'I don't know you,' said Becky. She stopped pacing and faced Roger. 'A code breaker?'

'It's a very honourable profession.' That was weak, said Roger C, even by your feeble standards. Not now!

'A code breaker involved with criminals and secret ministry people!' Becky put her hands on her hips and looked accusingly at Roger. 'Were you using me?'

Roger pushed Chloe gently to the floor and stood. He held Becky's shoulders, looked into her eyes. 'Yes and no,' he said.

Becky's eyes narrowed. Wrong answer. And then it happened again: a hand reached inside Roger's chest and gently squeezed his heart. It took his breath away, made him gasp softly, clutch his chest.

Becky was suddenly concerned. 'Are you alright?' she asked.

'It's the thought of losing you,' said Roger. 'It makes me feel sick.'

Becky drew breath to speak. Nothing came out.

Roger said, 'At first, the thought did cross my mind: stay with you for a while; keep out of The KOPALDA's way. But it happened anyway. If the thought had never entered my head, however briefly, we'd still have ended up ... here.'

Becky folded her arms.

'Love is a big word,' said Roger. 'And I don't know if what we have is love but I love to be with you, I love

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talking to you, I love sleeping with you, I love eating -'

'I get the message.'

'I've got a lot of baggage,' said Roger. 'A weird past, a strangely wired brain, and I've been weak and have some issues.'

'Issues?'

'Anyway, before I go, I just want to make sure I can ... well, come back when it's all sorted out.'

'Come back?' said Becky. 'Why, where are you going?'

'I have to sort out this Meadhill situation and see what can be done about The KOPALDA.'

'With this Julia woman?'

'I've known Julia for years. We've worked together since ... well practically forever.'

'And you're going to meet Meadhill after telling me he's a killer?' said Becky. 'Doesn't sound very sensible.'

'Nothing to worry about,' said Roger. 'Julia won't let anything happen to me. I'm a valuable asset again.' Roger assumed an air of mock-proudness. 'I rate armed protection, don't you know.'

Becky stood erect, her eyes now dry and bright. 'Then I should come too,' she said.

Roger was astonished. 'Don't be ridiculous,' he said. 'You, of all people have seen what violent people are capable of.'

'If it's as safe as you say there's nothing to worry about,' said Becky. 'And besides, if you want to catch Meadhill you're going to have to go to Teesside Airport and if you don't turn up with me he'll get suspicious.'

GARY BAKER

'No,' said Roger. 'I can't allow that.'

Becky snorted with derision. 'You can't allow it?'

'For goodness sake it's dangerous. This man's a nutcase. He's insane.'

The phone rang. Becky answered it. 'Hello?' A short pause and she held the phone out to Roger. 'It's for you. It's her.'

Roger took the phone. 'Julia?'

'Roger, myself and a team will be flying up to Teesside within the hour. I need you to do something for me.'

'Team?'

'I've managed to borrow an SAS team. Don't ask. We've had a quick conference and everyone agrees.'

'SAS? Well done, Julia.'

'Yes, Roger. So you'd better be back.'

'I am. Don't worry. Agreed about what?'

'We've all agreed that Betsy should go with you.'

'Becky. What? Why?'

Becky cocked her head on one side at the mention of her name and mouthed 'what?'

'Roger, they want you to go the Teesside Flight Club's hangar as arranged. They'll be with you all the way but you need to convince Becky to go with you otherwise your being there makes no sense and they may run for it. And it seems that these criminals you've ...' Julia struggled for words. 'Well, it seems that some of our people have heard of them and are very, very keen to talk to them about certain governmental issues.'

'But -'

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Julia interrupted Roger's protest, 'I'm relying on you Roger. You asked for my help remember? Well, this is it. I'll see you tonight.' The line clicked and purred as Julia put down the phone.

'Well?' said Becky.

Chapter 28

Roger slowly paced Becky's living room. He felt ridiculous. He'd bought a new white shirt, a stupid tie, spent ages ironing his suit under a damp tea towel, for what? So he could pretend he was going to a surprise party in an aircraft hangar! This was crazy. And taking Becky too. Exposing her to these lunatics. Lunatics on both sides. This was crazy.

He thought about sitting down but then he remembered the cat hairs. Where was she? He could hear Becky moving around upstairs. I wonder what she'll be wearing. Does she have a section of her wardrobe reserved for pretending to take boyfriend – boyfriend, what a word – pretending to take boyfriend to aircraft hangar for surprise birthday party, which it isn't really, it's a setup to capture some murdering freak.

Roger suppressed the urge to shout upstairs. The question, 'are you ready yet?' was the dumbest of all

questions. Clearly, if she was ready she'd be downstairs, not stood upstairs waiting for him to shout, 'are you ready yet?' at her. The question was not really a question, it was a command to hurry up. And why are my thoughts getting all churned up about such banal matters? Oh, yes. I'm probably going to die later this evening. That must have something to do with it.

'Are you ready yet?' Roger called upstairs.

'Coming.' Christ, she was! Had she been standing there waiting for him to ... pull yourself together man.

Roger looked at the ceiling and followed the sound of Becky's progress across the bedroom and down the stairs. The living room door opened and Becky walked in. Roger failed to prevent a sharp intake of breath.

'Becky Ketteringham,' he said. 'You look ... you are beautiful.'

Becky smiled uncertainly. 'You don't think it's a bit over the top?'

Roger sensed this was her best outfit: crazy sparkly silver stilettos, full length, figure hugging peach dress trimmed with tiny silver lace bits, fake diamond necklace, earrings and bracelet, hair up and secured with a peach bow, small glittery handbag. She twirled to show him the plunging rear.

At the site of Becky's exquisite back, Roger's gonads gave a little twinge of approval. The soft peach colour showed off her lightly tanned, firm, smooth skin to perfection and the smooth, rounded cut of the dress became modesty's guardian as one's eyes were dragged irresistibly down along Becky's gently valleyed spine.

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'You look like a film star,' he managed.

Putting on a Katherine Hepburn voice, Becky said, 'What does one wear to an ambush in an aircraft hangar, darling. I have simply no idea so I threw on this old thing.'

Roger took her hand and kissed it. 'You can't go,' he said. 'It's too dangerous. It's stupid. I'd never forgive myself if anything happened to you.'

Becky pulled her hand away and became business like. 'We have no choice,' she said. 'It's either this or a life running from mister nutcase, constantly looking over our shoulders.'

'It's just not fair that I got you involved with this. I can't believe I let this happen.'

'Well it has and I wouldn't change a thing.' Becky held Roger's cheek lightly in her hand. 'Besides, Chloe loves you too.' Chloe had appeared from nowhere and was busy rubbing her white fur onto Roger's trouser leg.

'Too? You mean, you love me?' Roger's eyes misted slightly.

'Maybe a little.'

The only sound in the room was Chloe's purring as she arched her white fluffiness against Roger's irresistible black legs.

Roger broke the spell. 'I suppose I'd better go.'

Becky snorted derisively, pulled out her car keys from the tiny sparkley bag, rattled them in front of him, spun on her left high heel and, leaving the sitting room, said over her shoulder, 'Come on then slowcoach.'

*

The little Ford Ka seemed to shrink further, hunkering down in sympathy with its occupants, as they ignored the turning towards Teesside Airport's brightly lit terminal and turned, instead, in the other direction, towards the dark hunched forms of the airports outlying buildings and hangars.

The Teesside Flight Club's sign was illuminated by the Ford's headlights. The sign leaned slightly next to a set of double gates set in the brittle steel fencing surrounding the airfield. One of the gates was half open, looking careless and casual.

'Let's leave the car here,' said Roger, not sure why, but it seemed like a good idea.

Becky parked the car a few feet past the gates and turned off the lights. Blackness swooped in on them.

They got out into the night, under a cloud free sky embedded with a myriad stars. Orion was rising clearly in front of Roger.

The slam of the doors ran away into the night and Becky must have pressed the key fob lock because the Ford's lights flashed, momentarily lighting up the gates and fencing with their amber brilliance. The looming, skeletal structure quickly sank back into black ink.

Roger and Becky stood for a moment letting their eyes adjust to the dimness. Becky reached for Roger's hand as the gates became faintly visible, illuminated by lights from the distant terminal. Beyond the gates, splashes of formaldehyde yellow dotted the great arched body of an otherwise dark hangar outlined against the night sky.

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'Lights,' said Roger unnecessarily. 'Must be over there.'

The pair picked their way cautiously along a rough gravel road towards the hangar. Roger looked around half expecting to see troops of heavily armed SAS men keeping pace with them. The dark sucked away his vision leaving only skirmishing grey dust mites of static.

'When do they all leap out and shout happy birthday?' asked Roger.

'You're starting to hurt my hand,' said Becky.

'Oh, sorry.'

The gravel road took them along the side of the hangar and around to its front. A vertical stripe of the formaldehyde yellow, about four feet wide, split the face of the hangar from the ground to its roof thirty feet in the air. Roger and Becky stepped into the blunt V of illuminated ground in front of the partially opened doors. They took one last look around. Where the hell was Julia and the cavalry?

Roger, leading Becky by the hand, stepped into the hangar.

*

The hangar accommodated two aircraft, both had been pushed in backwards and faced the hangar doors. A Learjet; sharp nosed and shark tailed; and a smaller, cuddlier Cessna. Both aircraft were shiny cream with red go-faster stripes running along their sides. Teesside Flight Club colours.

The rear of the hangar was the domain of the mechanics. Embedded in the smell of grease and diesel,

Meadhill sat on a plastic and tubular steel chair. Waiting.

From his vantage point he could see various tools, outlined like bodies at a murder scene, hung on the wall above work benches bearing the scars of numerous engine autopsies. Scraped, blue and red toolboxes skulked under the benches, stacked like the drawers of a morgue.

Meadhill re-ran those thoughts: 'outlined like corpses – engine autopsies - stacked like the drawers of a morgue?' There will be a killing tonight.

Movement caught his eye.

From his vantage point, Meadhill looked straight from the rear of the hangar, between the two aircraft, at the black vertical stripe of the open hangar door. If he chose to turn slightly, he could also see the two standard sized door entrances on either side of the hangar. But it was through the main hangar door, which he had left slightly open, that two figures slowly walked, squinting against the bright lights.

They stopped, looked around the unfamiliar setting. Meadhill's distant seated figure must have blended into the overall visual cacophony of strange and alien objects because the two figures did not register his presence. Instead they started walking slowly forwards, their attention switching focus between the aircraft either side of them as if something sinister might emerge at any moment.

This was fun. Meadhill sat invisible in full view. And didn't they look smart. Sexy little nurse had dressed up just for him and even the freak looked dressed to the

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nines.

To business.

Meadhill stood knowing his motion would attract their attention.

'Good evening,' he said, loud enough for his voice to carry the length of the hangar. The pair stopped dead, startled by his sudden appearance.

Meadhill picked up a square leather computer case standing next to his chair. 'I have something for you, Mister Peerson.' He turned his back on the couple and placed the case flat on the workbench. He unzipped it and popped the lid. The laptop screen fizzed out of standby mode showing a desktop with a picture of Stonehenge on a sunny day. Meadhill turned back towards Roger and Becky. They had not moved.

Adopting the cajoling tone used to egg on shy children, Meadhill said, 'Come on. It's alright. It won't bite you. Look.' He stood aside so they could see the screen.

Roger and Becky, hand in hand, walked slowly forward.

'That's right,' said Meadhill. 'Don't be shy.'

They stopped ten feet from Meadhill. 'What do you want?' asked Roger. His voice told Meadhill he was scared.

Meadhill reached under his arm and produced his 45 which he pointed at Roger's forehead.

'I want you to call off your nasty little software bunnies,' said Meadhill. He turned so the gun pointed at Becky's stomach. 'Or she dies.'

Becky inhaled quickly. Placed a hand over her mouth. Roger pulled her behind him.

Meadhill noticed that Roger's eyes were dancing as if trying to focus on some fast moving gnat and wondered if that was the origin of the word 'rattled'.

Roger swallowed and steadied his eyes. 'I need more than just a computer. It needs to be connected to the Internet.'

'It is,' said Meadhill. 'It has a wireless connection through a mobile phone card.'

Roger's eyes shuffled around again, like he was trying to work out some incredibly difficult problem. They stopped and fixed on Meadhill again. 'You will just kill us both anyway,' he said, 'so why should I bother?'

Meadhill sighed then sucked excess saliva through his teeth as a taste of treacle invaded his mouth. He advanced the ten feet between them in a fraction of a second and cracked Roger across the side of the head with a vicious back hand blow from his gun hand. The barrel gouged a bloody channel from above Roger's right ear to his right eyebrow. Roger hit the concrete hangar floor with a short hiss as his breath was thumped from his lungs.

Becky froze with the explosion of violence which allowed Meadhill to easily move behind her and clamp her body to him with his free left arm. 'Keep very still,' he said pressing the barrel of the gun against her nose, squashing her right nostril and making her eyes water.

Meadhill enjoyed the feel of Becky. She felt small and taught pressed against him. The small of her back

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pressed against his groin and her firm breasts pushed against his inner arm as he held her. Sexy little nurse. We'll have fun later.

Roger struggled to his feet swaying as he became vertical. He dabbed at the side of his head with his hand and then looked at his bloodied palm. He touched it again as if to confirm the unbelievable. He showed his hands to Meadhill, mouth agape, failing to comprehend, dazed, then registered Becky's predicament with Meadhill's gun pressed against her face.

'How about we blow your girlfriend's nose off, for starters?' said Meadhill.

There was no question Roger wasn't going to cooperate.

'Okay, okay, don't do anything I'll ... I'll fix things,' he said. He turned towards the laptop as Becky brought her right stiletto heel hard down onto Meadhill's injured foot. The reaction was more than she'd hoped for as Meadhill collapsed in agony. She tried her luck again and kicked out at his gun hand. Her foot connected solidly, knocking his automatic skidding across the concrete hangar floor.

Meadhill hardly noticed Becky's kick and the loss of his gun. The excruciating pain of Becky stamping on the wound originally inflicted by Andy M made vomit rise to the back of his throat. Adrenaline and anger kicked in and Meadhill looked up through the haze of tears just in time to see Roger charging at him like an ancient Norse berserker. Meadhill bared his teeth and hissed, 'You're dead you freak!' as Roger crashed into him.

*

Outside, lying hidden by night and tufts of grass, Julia watched the familiar figure of Roger move into the light from the open hangar door. He was holding the hand of some woman in evening dress. The woman who had made Roger into 'us'.

A large hand came into silhouette blocking her view of Roger and the girl. It made some kind of jerky sign.

Ahead of Julia lay, six, black clad, armed men. Each one trained a rifle on the figures at the hangar. The man silently making the signals had introduced himself an hour earlier as Kent. Just what she needed; Superman.

Kent never questioned the efficacy of the mission but equally left no doubt that he was in charge. Julia was never, under any circumstances whatsoever, to come between himself or his five member crew and the targets.

The targets. That description made Julia's blood freeze in her veins.

Her superiors had taken a lot of convincing that Roger Pearson was back and could, once again, be of immense value to the country. He was the finest code-maker and breaker in history and her preliminary evaluation was that he was, once again, completely stable due to the new relationship he had established. Bloody hell, Roger. That had better be true.

Julia's exterior cool hid a stomach-churning curiosity. Who was this woman? Was she genuine? What normal person could understand Roger, appreciate his talents, forgive his foibles. What did she really want?

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The added danger presented by this seemingly well connected crime syndicate Roger was afraid of, called for an armed response. Julia had been very convincing when she argued her presence would also be essential if Roger were to be brought back into the fold.

Although Julia thought she carried off the tight black jump suit pretty well, the balaclava was beginning to itch like hell. But not enough to take her mind off the reality of lying in damp grass in the middle of nowhere with a bunch of armed men about to take on a psychotic killer and his organisation. For the tenth time since being forced flat onto the ground thirty minutes earlier, Julia gently cursed the bladder Gods.

The six men ahead of rose from the grass.

Roger and his new friend had disappeared into the hangar.

Kent and his men advanced at a silent run, their rifles levelled at the hangar entrance.

Julia staggered up and charged after them, stiff from lying still so long and acutely aware of her thunderous girly gate as knees and elbows scythed the air in a farcical facsimile of the soldier's neat, compact and silent dash.

Kent waved his hand in the air again and six soldiers, acting as one organism, stopped, dropping to one knee just shy of the lit ground at the hangar entrance.

Julie took several gangly strides to come to a halt, finally bending over, hands on knees, gasping noisily for air.

After several deep breaths and a round of

coughing, Julia looked up to see Kent looking over his shoulder at her.

'What?' she gasped, her question bouncing off the hangar's metallic sides into the night air. Julia realised she must have sounded like the Flying Scotsman depressurising its boilers after its run from London to Edinburgh. 'Sorry,' she hoarse whispered.

Kent turned his attention back to the hangar entrance and did some more hand signalling. The six soldiers lined up against the hangar wall while Kent approached the entrance and, using what looked like a small dentist's mirror on a stick, looked inside.

Julia was starting to sweat into her balaclava so pulled it off and shook out her hair.

'God,' she whispered to herself, 'I must look a sight.'

Only a withering look from the soldier next to her prevented her from pulling out her compact and checking her lipstick.

Julia checked on herself instead: she felt she had somehow metamorphosed into a clumsy, baby-antelope-on-ice, girly creature. Perhaps the stress of running around a field in the middle of the night with six heavily armed men is beginning to show, she thought.

They stayed like that, hugging the metal hangar wall, for what seemed an age as Kent watched from the safety of his small mirror.

Julia could bear it no longer. 'What's going on?' she hissed over the heads of five soldiers at Kent. As if to answer her, a shout of a man in pain suddenly burst from

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between the hangar doors. Was that Roger? She couldn't tell. Oh, my God, have I let him down again?

Kent tucked away his mirror, punched the air twice and led the charge into the hangar. The five soldiers followed Kent into the light.

Julia hung back. Flattening herself against the cold corrugated wall. Panting. Her heart threatened to leap from her chest.

Muffled shots. Shouts. She recognised Kent's voice barking orders. Scuffling. More muffled shots. Then a very loud bang that made Julia flinch.

Gathering her courage, she looked quickly through the doorway then ducked back.

Kent's men were placed three on either side ahead of the door, under the wings of aircraft. The woman in the evening dress was sprawled on the floor, on her side with her back to Julia. Roger stood over the fallen woman his hands in the air pleading for the soldiers to stop shooting. Another man, grey hair and dressed in black, ran in a zigzag pattern across the back of the hangar.

Julia looked into the hangar again just in time to see a far door slam shut and take hits from several shots. That must have been the grey haired man. He must have got away.

Roger was kneeling, his clothes covered in dust, bent over the fallen woman.

Julia ran into the hangar and up to Roger.

'Roger!' she called. 'Are you all right?' Julia felt a bee-sting of regret at her own feelings. She wasn't asking, are you alright physically? She meant; are you alright

mentally? Is the loss of this woman going to damage you so as to cause me undue embarrassment? A moment of self-loathing at her own selfishness brought a stab of indigestion.

Roger ignored her, obviously distraught.

'Becky, Becky,' he whimpered over and over. 'Becky, Becky, Becky ...'

*

When Becky stamped her stiletto heel into his damaged foot, Meadhill's scream of pain had snapped Roger's attention back from the laptop computer he was walking towards. The tumble drier in Roger's head had been turned on again and thoughts and images flapped and sailed around his mind. The laptop was a point of focus, something to cling to.

Like garments at the tumble drier window, recognisable thoughts flashed into view to immediately disappear again under an avalanche of confusion. Becky, Meadhill, gun, laptop, Trojans, danger ... Meadhill's scream. Becky!

She had got free! She had hurt Meadhill! Roger A watched numbly as Becky kicked Meadhill's gun from his hand. Becky you star! Whoop, whoop!

Roger C shook his internal head disapprovingly. Bad move, bad move. Too dangerous. Roger B screamed, GET HIM GET HIM GET HIM! And a hot madness rose in Roger. From his feet, it charged up through his legs, scorching his stomach and chest and threatened to burst from the top of his skull rippling the air with its heat. How dare you point a gun at my Becky, you bastard!

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Roger ran at Meadhill, willing the soles of his shoes to grip the concrete floor so he could accelerate more quickly, urging his legs to pump faster, feeling he was fighting through syrup.

When Roger careered into Meadhill, he was an unfeeling whirlwind of anger and hate and as effective as a child wielding a feather pillow.

Meadhill took the force of Roger's charge, allowed it to overwhelm him momentarily, then spun and added to it with a deft kick and shove causing Roger to hit and roll across the hangar floor for a good fifteen feet.

The manoeuvre was completely instinctive with Meadhill's real concern turning to the black figures rushing through the hangar door. Two of them had already taken up shooting positions and were aiming low at his legs as he raised himself. He leapt and rolled sideways across his shoulders as parts of the concrete floor burst in small eruptions around him. He came to his feet with his gun back in his hand and Roger staggering to his feet between him and the shooters.

Roger stood, dazed and confused. What was that noise? Automatic gun fire! Like in the tunnel under Admiralty arch. Meadhill had his gun again! Roger's mind screamed at him to get to Meadhill who turned and ran away from Roger towards, and past, Becky. Roger gave chase. More gun fire. From behind him. Someone shouted, 'Get out of the way! Get down, now!' Meadhill had turned and was running backwards, his gun raised, pointed at Becky who had turned to face him. No! The shot from Meadhill's un-silenced 45 made Roger duck

involuntarily. The noise left his ears ringing. Meadhill, had turned and was running for a side entrance to Roger's right. Tools on the wall behind Meadhill danced as they were hit by fire from behind Roger. Becky stood stock still. He'd missed! Roger ran a few steps past Becky but sanity prevailed and he stopped. No way. Don't do that. He'll kill you for sure. Shots were still being fired.

Roger turned. Becky's chest was red with blood. That dress will be ruined. She collapsed. There were men in black pointing guns at him. Pointing past him. At Meadhill. Stop. Stop. Stop. Becky. Becky! No.

*

Kent instructed one of his team, the designated medic, to tend to Becky, and another to cover them. He told an unlistening Julia and Roger to stay put until he returned then set off with his other three soldiers after Meadhill.

The medic crouched down taking off his pack which was filled with field dressings. He gently rolled Becky onto her back to get a better look at her wound.

Roger's hands made motions to help but didn't actually touch her. Julia held Roger's shoulders from behind.

Becky opened her eyes letting rip with an impressive stream of profanities ending with, '... hurts.'

So this is what Roger finds attractive, thought Julia. No, that's not fair.

Meadhill's bullet had missed its intended target and instead, carved out a slice of flesh from Becky's upper inner arm. The wound was bleeding profusely and the blood on her chest was from her own hand as she first of

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all grabbed instinctively at her wound then patted herself to see if she could feel any other injuries.

The medic lifted her arm and applied a pad which he then held in place with a bandage around her arm.

'Keep your arm down and pressed to your side until you can get proper medical attention,' said the medic.

Becky nodded. 'I know,' she said.

'She's a nurse,' said Roger sitting back on his haunches. Julia had to back off to one side to make room for him.

'Where's my bag?' said Becky trying to sit up.

The soldier left to guard them came forward holding Becky's tiny, sparkly handbag; looking rather sheepish, even through his balaclava.

She tried to take it with her good hand but sank back wincing with pain. The medic took her shoulders and gently laid her back saying, 'Take it easy.' The other guard pulled off his balaclava and offered it as a small woollen pillow for under Becky's head.

Roger took the bag, thanking the guard. 'Don't worry,' he said to Becky. 'I have it.'

Becky smiled bravely.

It was all Julia could do to stop herself kicking the plucky little princess. 'We have to go, Roger,' she said.

'Yes,' agreed Roger. 'We need to get her to a Doctor straight away.'

Julia took Roger's arm. 'Absolutely. Kent can take her to the hospital when he comes back. In the meantime I need to make sure you're -'

'What? No way,' he said. 'We can't leave Becky here.'

The medic agreed. 'We only have one vehicle ma'am,' he said.

'My car's parked outside the gates,' said Becky.

Julia stood over her. 'Becky is it?' she said. 'You just ...' They were right, of course. They should wait until Kent returned before moving anywhere. 'You just lie back and rest. I wasn't ... I was just a bit anxious you -'

The sound of heavy footsteps saved Julia. Kent and his three men jogged back from the single doorway at the rear of the hangar.

'Let's move,' he said quickly appraising the situation. 'Target Charlie got away but may still be in the area. You,' he pointed at the soldier left on guard, 'take the casualty's car and follow us.'

Roger took Becky's car keys from her purse and handed them to the soldier who ran off through the main hangar doors.

'Everyone else,' said Kent, 'evacuate back to the vehicle.'

The vehicle turned out to be black Mercedes minibus with heavily tinted windows. It was parked in the inky darkness one hundred yards farther along from Becky's own car.

They drove the ten miles or so from Teesside Airport to Darlington Memorial Hospital in silence.

*

Meadhill sat in his car testing his foot by pressing it down on the brake pedal.

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'The pain is out there,' he said aloud. 'An interesting phenomenon, that's all.' He put more pressure on the brake pedal. 'It's just a message to my brain, that's all.'

The only road in and out of the Teesside Airport complex ran past the car park where Meadhill sat. A small bus with blacked out windows followed by a small Ford Ka headed away along this road.

'Amateurs.' Meadhill started the engine.

*

'How am I going to explain this?' asked Becky as she stepped down from the bus and, helped by Roger, headed for casualty.

'Don't worry,' said Julia. 'I'll sort things out with the police.'

Becky nodded uncertainly as two nurses, who obviously recognised her, descended. They flapped madly about, pushed Roger out of the way and took her arms on either side and demanded to know what had happened. Roger tagged awkwardly along behind them as Becky told her story and her two friends lamented the destruction of her best peach dress.

Julia leaned against the bus as Kent lit a cigarette beside her.

'When Nurse Becky,' said Julia, pausing to wave smoke away from her face, 'has been taken care of, I need to go somewhere quiet to make sure Peerson, Target Alpha, is ... fully functional.'

'Yes ma'am,' said Kent not caring about the smoke. He let his gaze move over her figure-hugging black

jumpsuit. 'Just let me know where.'

Julia sensed his interest. Quickly she said, 'Peerson has a place not far from here. In Barton. About five miles away if memory serves. It's nice and quiet out there.'

'No problem,' said Kent.

A short plump man wearing a fluorescent yellow jacket puffed up to Kent. 'You'll have to move your bus,' he said.

Kent dropped his cigarette, crushed it with his boot and repeated, 'No problem.' Turning back to Julia, Kent said, 'We'll be parked in the road near the hospital entrance.' He made his eyes smile at her. 'When you're ready.'

Julia nodded then walked towards the hospital entrance acutely aware of Superman's gaze following her movements.

*

Roger stood at the door to a small private hospital room and watched Becky as she slept. Julia had worked her governmental magic and, as well as making the police disappear, had secured Becky a room which Roger considered much safer than her home while Meadhill was at large.

He closed the door quietly, leaned back on it and let himself relax at last.

That had not been fun, Roger thought to himself. So much for me using little nurse Becky. There had been moments during the last few hours when he would have given his life to prevent any harm coming to her. He was smitten alright. And it felt good. Didn't it? No, it bloody

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didn't. This was a complication he could well do without.

Roger guessed that Julia, and the mandarins pulling her strings, would consider his home in Barton compromised and insist he move down to London or somewhere. He couldn't ask Becky to move. Could he?

Roger looked up. Julia was waiting for him at the end of the corridor, standing with her arms folded, rather like the nurses do. It must be contagious.

Roger walked up to her nodding his head approvingly. 'Black suits you,' he said looking her up and down.

Julia tossed her hair. 'What? These old things?'

'You look tired though,' said Roger.

The game ended there. Julia became very businesslike.

'The team is waiting outside,' she said.

'What? All this time?'

'Yes. Don't worry, last I heard they were ordering pizza and beer.'

'Where did you get these guys from? Is there a section in Yellow Pages for Cavalry?'

'You're very important to us, Roger,' said Julia. 'Important to the country. And ... a very valuable asset.' She took his arm and turned him towards the exit. 'but ...' Julia stopped and looked Roger in the eye, 'I have to check you again. You know that.'

'Don't want to be accepting damaged goods,' said Roger.

Julia ignored the remark. 'Let's go back to your place and run some tests. What do you say? Will only

GARY BAKER

take an hour or so.'

Back home. Why not.

'I haven't actually been home for ... well, for ages. Can't remember the last time.'

'I know,' said Julia.

*

The house sulked under the night sky, flaunting an air of abandonment; its prime rooted beyond a marker grounded in the past; its construction on the sunnier side of a bridge between then and now.

Roger had been different then too. A product of different memories. He could remember not having the memories.

The cherry tree seemed a fraction bigger; the bushes bushier.

Yet it was only a few short days ago that he'd left. Oozing snot and shedding tears.

All the curtains were drawn. He didn't remember closing them all. The orange glow from the streetlamp turned his bright red front door a dark shade of amber.

He patted his trousers and jacket. No key.

'That's okay,' said Julia, 'I just happen to have a spare.' She unlocked the door pushing hard against a pile of junk mail and newspapers.

'And you don't even look embarrassed,' said Roger.

'About having a key? Don't be silly. I own you,' she said. The joke wasn't funny.

Kent and his men were behind them. 'Want us to check it out for you ma'am?' he asked.

'Err, no,' said Julia, glancing quickly at Roger. 'The

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place has been under twenty-four hour surveillance for quite some time. Thanks for everything, Kent.'

Kent inhaled to say something, seemed to think better of it, made his eyes smile at her again, saluted with one finger and returned to the bus.

'What?' asked Roger. 'Surveillance?'

'Afraid so,' said Julia. She pointed across the road. A row of bungalows with immaculate front gardens faced them. In the large sitting room window of the bungalow exactly opposite, a man waved back. It was Peter.

'That's Peter,' said Roger.

'Yes,' said Julia.

'I know him.'

'Yes.'

'He's got a dog called Sally. A Labrador.'

'Yes, Roger.'

'I thought he was a retired builder.'

'He is,' said Julia. 'He used to be one of those builders who organised the very last coat of paint on the most secret of doors. He's been doing us a favour for all the work we pushed his way over the years.'

'But I know him,' said Roger again and waved back.

Why was he surprised? It had just never occurred to Roger he had been under constant surveillance. Even at home.

'Let's go in,' said Julia, 'The neighbours will talk.'

The house was cold.

'It's the pressure,' said Roger. 'If the water pressure drops the heating clicks off.'

Roger turned lights on and pointed out the kitchen and lounge to Julia.

'I'll just pop up and put the heating on,' he said.

'Mind if I put the kettle on?'

'No, please, help yourself,' said Roger trotting up the wide stairway. 'I doubt if there's any milk though.'

Roger let some water in to re-pressurise the system from a valve he kept permanently connected to the mains. Half a turn, a whishing noise and the pressure indicator quickly moved up to the one bar mark. He pressed the reset button and the boiler clicked a few times, the gas caught and burst into life. The house perked up.

*

Meadhill pulled his car into a parking area in front of Half Moon Pub and switched off his lights. Two hundred yards away, past the ancient stone cross that marked the centre of Barton village, the small black bus pulled away from the front of Roger's House.

He waited until the bus was out of sight before getting out of his car. Blood squelched in his shoe, warm and sticky.

Meadhill looked around. All windows were dark. The only sound came from his car as it cooled and settled.

He pulled his 45 from under his arm. From his left jacket pocket he pulled a silencer and deftly screwed it onto the barrel, never taking his eyes off Roger's house. He checked the clip and, to complete the cliché moment, hauled back the slide so loading the first shell with a double click that echoed loud and alien in that dark,

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sleeping English village.

*

Roger went back downstairs and into the front room. A coal fire was laid ready to light. Roger vaguely remembered doing it. A layer of newspapers, some fire lighters, some small sticks and some coal. He pulled a long match from its holder. The match spluttered into life as it was dragged through the scratchy embrace. Roger lit the newspaper along the front and watched as the flames caught the firelighters and soon had the sticks crackling in a very satisfactory manner.

Gentle creeks and groans moved under the floors and in the walls as hot water pushed its way through the pipes and into the old cold radiators. The familiar sounds of home brought the house closer to Roger. It hadn't been that long, after all.

'It'll soon warm up!' Roger raised his voice so Julia would be able to hear him in the kitchen. He had a quick look round. Seemed okay. Fairly neat. Nothing horrible lying about. What was the kitchen like? Had he filled the dishwasher?

He hopped up the step from the lounge, crossed the hallway and joined Julia in the kitchen. He cast a critical eye around. Not too bad actually. Bit of a musty smell. No growth laden dishes lying around at least.

Julia leaned her buttocks against a kitchen unit, folded her arms – was this becoming a habit – and looked at the ceiling. It was a very high, timber-framed barn-like construction and always drew admiring comments from women over the years. Men usually said, 'nice floor',

while tapping the stripped floorboards with their foot. Women usually looked up and said, 'nice kitchen.' Did that mean anything? Probably not.

Julia looked down and rubbed her foot on the old, ridged floorboards. 'Nice floor,' she said.

No. It didn't mean anything.

The stainless steel electric kettle behind Julia began to grumble and pop. Julia lurched forwards in surprise.

'Noisiest kettle on the planet,' said Roger opening a high cupboard. 'I have some Chinese tea,' he said. 'With Jasmine. Very good.'

'Sounds fine. Anything hot and wet will do me,' said Julia.

Roger placed two identical red mugs on the surface near the kettle then fussed around getting the tea bags out of their shrink wrapped box.

The two stood and watched as the kettle came noisily to the boil then clicked itself off.

The kitchen was suddenly quiet. Quiet enough for the sound of the rain to be heard hitting the skylight windows in the roof.

'Started raining,' said Roger as he used a teaspoon to prod the teabags and coax colour into the hot water he had poured into the cups.

'Looks like we got inside just in time,' said Julia.

Roger ran the cold water tap for a few seconds then topped up each cup with water to cool them down a little. He handed a mug to Julia. 'Try that,' he said.

Julia took a sip. 'Good,' she said, nodding.

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'Aromatic.'

The two sipped. Delayed.

*

Meadhill kept low as he moved silently along the fence running up to Roger's open gate.

The kitchen window was just six feet away and he could clearly see the back of Roger's head as he stood side by side with a dark haired woman.

Meadhill ducked out of view as Roger turned to face her.

*

'Okay,' said Roger at last. 'Let's get this over with.'

'Yes,' said Julia.

Abandoning their mugs, Roger and Julia left the kitchen and entered the front room where Roger pulled out a calculator from a corner cabinet, handed it to Julia and then lay down on the sofa.

Julia slid a chair easily over the wood polished floor and sat facing Roger.

She said the words. Roger relaxed and, after a few minutes, went under.

She asked some simple, by Roger's previous standards, arithmetical questions to start with.

'What's the cube root of seven four zero eight eight?'

'Forty-two,' he answered instantly.

'What are the primary factors of three one two nine one?'

'Thirteen, twenty-nine and eighty-three.' Again, no delay in answering.

Julia then took a very careful tour around Roger's mind. The three Roger personalities responded. Roger B asking, as always, if she was wearing stockings. Each of the Roger's unique personalities betrayed themselves to her in turn. Unique shadow puppets outlined against the screen of his voice. Occasionally Roger B and C would try to trick her. But the shadows they cast always gave them away.

The personality which had in the past identified itself to Julia as Jennifer did not respond. It seemed she was gone or suppressed so deeply Julia could not raise her. This was the worry for Julia as Jennifer had appeared to be the holder of Roger's savant talents. When asked about his abilities on a previous occasion Roger had answered to the effect that he, or one of the Rogers, would ask Jennifer the question and she would tell him. Roger simply repeated out loud what Jennifer had told him. Now Jennifer seemed to be gone, how did it work? Roger A, the dominant personality for most of the time, said that the answers just came to him. Whether or not his code making and breaking skills had been compromised would have to remain an unknown until he was back at work and in a more controlled environment.

Julia prodded Roger with unhappy memories forcing him to recall the times during and immediately after both Jennifer and Harry's death. Roger coped well. As far as Julia could tell, Roger was stable.

She brought Roger gently back from his deep hypnotic state.

Roger sat up. 'I did okay, didn't I?' he said.

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'That,' Meadhill's voice cut across the room like a thunderclap, 'was fascinating.' He stood in the doorway, humourlessly showing his gold tooth, a big, silenced gun held by his side, his long black coat glistened with raindrops.

Chapter 29

Meadhill didn't waste time pointing the gun at Roger. Levelling the heavy, silenced weapon at Julia, Meadhill addressed Roger: 'You know why I'm here.'

Oh, Jesus, Jesus.

'Let's not get carried away,' said Roger, standing. 'I'll do whatever you want.'

Julia's unblinking eyes watched the gun. Silence.

Say something, prodded Roger B. 'My - the - there's a computer, a connected computer upstairs in the study. Spare bedroom.'

'What does he want, Roger?' Julia's asked.

Meadhill took half a pace towards her, staggering slightly, his face suddenly veined and red with anger. 'Don't you talk about me as if I'm not here, bitch!'

The last word hung in the air, fading to a tinnitus whine in the silence.

Roger and Julia stood rigid, not daring to breathe,

waiting for Meadhill to regain control of himself. At last he motioned with the gun for them to leave the room. He moved sideways to let them by.

Roger led Julia and Meadhill out of the front room, up the wide stairs to his study. He paused outside, waiting for permission to proceed.

Meadhill came up the stairs slowly, heaving on the banister. He left a spot of blood on the pale green carpet of every other step.

'In you go,' he said, motioning Roger to enter.

Julia followed Roger into the small study. Meadhill gave her a gentle shove forcing her to stagger and sit on a leather settee jammed into the space. Roger sat at his terminal.

'Good boy,' said Meadhill. 'Now strangle those software bunnies of yours and give me back my money.'

Roger sat and pressed the computer's round, dimple switch. The screen wanted his password. Roger's hands paused above the gunmetal-grey keyboard.

'What happens,' Roger thought about his next words very carefully, 'what happens to us when I'm done?'

Meadhill pushed the barrel of the gun into the back of Roger's head. 'You should be more worried about what will happen to you if you don't do as I say, freak,' he said through clenched teeth.

'Let Julia go,' said Roger, his head being forced down towards the keyboard.

'Do it!' hissed Meadhill, pushing harder.

'Let Julia go,' said Roger, putting his arms by his

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side, away from the keyboard.

Meadhill turned and aimed a vicious back hand swipe with his gun hand at Julia. Roger flinched involuntarily at the sickening thud as the weapon connected with Julia's skull. His own injury throbbed in sympathy. She shrieked in pain and sprawled, stunned, on the settee.

Meadhill pushed the gun into the side of her face. Blood pooled into the hollow of her cheek, around the barrel.

'Do it! Do it now!'

'Let her go,' said Roger quietly.

'Okay. You just killed her.' Meadhill pushed the barrel harder into Julia's face making her whimper. Roger closed his eyes making his hands into fists.

Oh Jesus. Oh, Jesus.

The shot did not come. Meadhill breathed heavily and Julia lay sobbing.

'Okay,' said Meadhill, moving away from Julia. 'I'm feeling generous.' He looked down at Julia. 'Get out,' he said. 'Now.'

Julia got uncertainly to her feet, holding the side of her head and, using the doorframe for support, she left the study.

Meadhill sat on the settee with a sigh.

Roger turned to check that Julia had, in fact, left. He looked at Meadhill. 'You know,' he said, 'Meadhill is an anagram of Heimdall. A Norse God. With gold teeth.'

Meadhill looked at Roger with contempt. 'Just get on with it you freak,' he said.

Roger turned back to the keyboard and started to type. 'Heimdall was the guardian of the Bifrost Bridge.' Roger typed and talked at the same time. 'The bridge connecting the mortal world, Midgard, to Asgard where the Gods held council.'

'Shut up,' said Meadhill.

'According to legend, Heimdall will be the last of the Gods to die. If memory serves.' Roger stabbed at the return key. 'There,' he said. 'Done.'

'Prove it,' said Meadhill.

'You'll know in the morning.'

'Show me now.'

'I can't. It will take until nine o'clock tomorrow morning.'

'Why should I ... believe you?'

'Because if I'm lying you will kill Julia and Becky and I can't hide them both from you forever.'

Meadhill stretched out his leg. Slowly tensed his damaged foot. 'And what ... insurance have you taken out on yourself?'

'I have to contact my,' Roger paused and turned to look at Meadhill, "software bunnies" within the year. Otherwise ...'

'It all starts again?'

'Yes.'

'Excellent,' said Meadhill getting carefully to his feet. 'I have ... identities even you don't know about. You've given me plenty of time to transfer my assets.' He pointed his gun at Roger's chest. 'Before I kill you, know this ...' Roger's minds were calm. United in their

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acceptance of the inevitable. '... I'm going to visit your girlfriend,' No! 'I'm going to fuck her so she screams my name and begs for more then I'm going to cut her -'

'You are one sick fucker.' A harsh male voice from outside the study cut through Meadhill's promise.

Meadhill froze, not taking his eyes off Roger. 'Aunty M,' he said. 'You really should have called first.'

Chuck. Meadhill's head jerked, his left ear erupted. A red plume of blood, brains and bone splattered the books lining the study wall. His knees buckled and his body crumpled to the floor.

Roger, unable to close his mouth leaned forward and looked out of the study doorway.

Julia's terrified eyes looked back at him. A large hand covered her mouth. She floated in mid-air. Her feet were six inches off the ground. A man, a broad, black jacketed man with cropped hair, a scarred face and thin eyes held her effortlessly clamped to his body with one arm.

In his other hand, a smoking barrel. Another gun pointed at Roger's eyes.

'Ladies first,' said the gravel voiced newcomer putting the weapon to Julia's head. Her eyes brimmed with tears.

Bang! A loud report that made Roger cringe and jump back into the study. Something heavy hit the floor. Roger quickly recovered and looked out onto the landing. Julia lay on her back, on top of the man. She pulled at his arm and thrashed with her legs in an effort to get up. A tall figure in black brushed past Roger and stooped to

help Julia. Another similarly dressed man brushed past Roger to get into the study.

'Clear!' a voice said behind him.

Julia was on her feet. Leaning against the familiar figure. She looked up at him, brushed hair out of her eyes. 'Kent,' she said. 'Superman to the rescue. What ... what brings you here at this hour?'

The concern in Kent's eyes gave way to a smile. He turned to Roger. 'You owe that neighbour of yours. The one in the bungalow opposite. He called it in.'

Chapter 30

South Park, Darlington. Sunshine, kids and dogs chasing squirrels, people strolling.

Walking arm in arm with Roger, Becky, dressed in her hospital whites, looked thoughtfully across the brand new bowling green, through the trees, at the fenced off chaos which was the Darlington dog show. The MoD were insisting Roger reside somewhere safer and he had just asked Becky to move south to London with him. She had yet to reply.

Roger broke the silence. 'I used to bring Harry here.' He stopped walking. 'Sorry about that. You must be sick of me talking about Harry.'

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'It's only to be expected,' said Becky, patting Roger's arm. 'It's still early days yet.'

'Sorry about this as well.' Roger looked back over his shoulder at two large men in grey suits and sunglasses keeping pace with them some fifteen yards behind.

Becky shrugged. 'All part of the package I suppose.'

They continued their walk approaching a large black cage on their left. Adults and children alike poked their fingers between the mesh making cheep cheep noises and sucking noisily between pursed lips trying to attract the birds. Inside the cage were budgerigars, parakeets, zebra finches even a large clown-suited macaw. The smaller birds flew backwards and forwards in panic. One end of the cage to the other. Backwards and forwards. Their wings beating a tattoo, a plea for freedom, with each short flight. The Macaw clambered awkwardly around the cage using claws and beak. Testing the mesh. Endlessly searching for a way out.

Roger and Becky came abreast of the cage; a fast-moving figure flew out in front of them, landing with a clatter. A small girl let out a shriek. Becky flinched, grabbing at Roger's arm. The youth on the skateboard ignored them, continued his manic rush along the black tar path, using people as markers for his impromptu slalom course.

Becky relaxed and they carried on walking.

To their right an enormous cast-iron cannon tilted on immobile wheels. Children hung from its barrel watched by a half dozen or so adults sat on a section of

low wall. The first adult faced Roger and Becky, the second faced away, the third faced them, and so on. Like self-conscious sweethearts on an elongated love-seat.

To their left a playground squirming and squealing with children. Becky initiated a stop, turning Roger so they both looked at the playground and its chaotic content.

The question still hung between them. Roger felt a heaviness settling below his heart. Started to feel foolish.

They looked at each other. Becky's eyes moist. 'I'm sorry, Roger,' she said.

Roger looked at the floor. Looked up at the playground. Looked past the playground to the cream tents and striped marquees of the dog show. Looked anywhere except at Becky.

Becky continued, 'There's the hospital, my house, mother, the cats ... that's silly. Roger, we hardly know each other -'

'You'll be telling me next how flattered you are,' said Roger unable to suppress a cruel tone. 'I'm sorry,' he said quickly. 'Of course. You're right. It's way too soon.' Roger turned to face Becky. Gently held her shoulders. 'How about this,' he said, 'I'll go and sort things out in London and convince the powers that be that Darlington is still as safe as anywhere. I'll be back in a couple of weeks. How does that sound?'

Becky smiled up at Roger. Put a hand on his chest. Lifted herself on tip-toes and kissed him lightly on the lips. 'Goodbye, Roger.' She had not believed him. 'I have to go to work,' she said.

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'Right,' said Roger. 'Right. You take care. I'll see you soon.'

Becky walked away past his two guards; arms folded, small, ponytail swishing from side to side. Roger felt drained, numbed, sick. Thoughts of Jennifer and Harry began crowding his thoughts. No, he told himself, I have to move on.

*

Roger had two suitcases opened on his bed at home in Barton. He mechanically emptied his drawers and wardrobe. Transferring the contents to the suitcases. Plopping them in one at a time. Not really caring if the shirts got creased or there was an even spread of clothes.

Roger stopped. The bedroom walls had been hand painted in shades of yellow and orange using a rag or some similar method before he had moved in. A waste high border of alternate amber and white sea shells had been carefully transferred onto each wall.

White shells and a hint of gold.

Above and below each sea shell was a horizontal row of dots. Dark dots. Like beads on a necklace.

Roger felt faint.

Roger B said, Oh My God.

Roger C screamed, it's them, it's them - over and over.

QUIET!

Roger arrowed in on the memories:

In the park. The caged birds. Fingers poking the mesh. A perfect white cuff. A hint of expensive gold watch. Grey hair under a dark fedora. The Captain?

Could that have been The Captain? Move along. Children playing on the canon. Sat on the wall, among the watchful adults, his back to him; the dark denim shirt; the black string and beads showing through matted, dark, dreadlocked hair on the back of his neck. The hint of beard fused into a gaunt cheek. What do you call guys like him these days? Tramps? Delinquents? Travellers? Mr Thin! Mr Thin, the beggar in Blackpool, had been in South Park. The KOPALDA tattoo!

And Roger knew in a thunderclap of truth that Becky was in grave danger.

He ran from his bedroom heading for the stairs. 'Err, err,' what the hell was his name? 'You! Guard!' Taking the stairs two at a time. Don't catch your heel. 'Where are you? We must get to the hospital quickly! Hey!'

Roger bounced off the wall at the bottom of his stairs, turned left into the kitchen. The noise of a newspaper being quickly crumpled behind him placed one of his guards in the sunken living room. The other was in the kitchen, holding a teabag suspended in a red mug, looking surprised as Roger burst in.

Car keys! 'Where are the car keys?' demanded Roger. The guard instinctively reached into his pocket.

'I have them here.' He knocked over the hot tea. 'Shit!'

Roger grabbed the keys from his open palm and ran for the back door. Shouts behind him. 'Wait! Stop! Mr Peerson! Sir!'

Two black Mercedes were parked outside his

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house. Half on and half off the grass verge. Which one? Roger stabbed at the key fob. Nothing. He squeezed and prodded. The front car's lights flashed pale amber. The colour of the formaldehyde mixture that preserves the dead.

Roger was out of Barton heading along the straight section of the road to Darlington when he noticed the other black Mercedes catching up to him.

Good lads, he thought. Don't forget to call the cavalry.

At roundabouts Roger held his breath and trusted to German engineering. He clipped a parked car and lost the left wing mirror on Woodlands drive. Oblivious to the wreckage in his wake Roger had one thought. Get to Becky.

He screeched to a halt outside the casualty entrance. Forgetting to take the car out of gear Roger fell hard onto the road taking the skin off the palms of his hands as the car leapt forwards when he tried to get out.

People. People were in the way as he pushed through the double glass doors. People everywhere. Limping, sat, stood, talking, waiting – a nurse – no not Becky – a white uniform – no. 'BECKY!' His cry silenced the crowded casualty reception. Echoed away through fluorescent halls and passageways. Roger ran up to a uniformed woman laden with patient files. 'Becky,' demanded Roger. 'Nurse Becky Ketteringham. Where is she?' The orderly backed off. Obviously scared. 'Sorry,' said Roger. 'But it's really urgent. She could be in grave danger. Do you know how I can find her?'

The orderly pointed to a stairwell. 'She's probably down -' Roger ran for the stairs before the sentence was finished. Down the stairs two at a time. Don't catch your heel. The hubbub behind him started up again as he descended. Round the first corner. Watch out, someone was coming up towards him.

Roger stopped dead. Flattened himself against the wall as he recognised the tall, cadaverous figure of Mr Thin walking slowly up the stairs. He was two steps below Roger and already their heads were at the same level. Mr Thin stopped on the same step. Towered over him. Roger's head shook with tension.

Mr Thin stooped down. Dreadlocks dangled and swung forming a matted hood half covering his face. Mr Death. Stale alcohol smell. Hands thrust into filthy jean pockets. Faded tattoos. Black beaded necklace. His face stopped an inch from Roger.

'Nice tits,' he whispered.

Mr Thin continued his steady progress upwards leaving Roger frozen.

The ache in Roger's hand brought him round. He'd been tightly grasping the handrail and the pain from his raw palms had become unbearable.

Becky!

Roger continued his descent. Round a corner, into a passageway. Lying on the floor: Becky. Oh, God. Was she was breathing? Yes!

Becky sat up. 'What the hell was that about?' she said, looking down at herself. She had six bright yellow post it notes stuck to her chest. She pulled one off. 'Bang,'

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she read. Another read, 'Stab.' Another, 'Bang.'

Roger squatted beside Becky and gently peeled off a note stuck to her hair.

'That lunatic pushed me over then stuck these all over me.' She noticed Roger for the first time. 'Roger?'

'It's a warning,' he said and read from the note he'd taken from her hair. "'Peerson: return the money and she lives.'" There's a number.'

Becky put her hand to her mouth. 'Oh, My God.'

Roger stood and helped Becky to her feet.

'Don't worry,' he said. 'It ends here. Goodbye, Becky.'

Becky stretched out a hand but her fingers had yellow post it notes stuck to them making the gesture ludicrous. By the time she had unstuck her fingers and rolled the notes into a sticky ball Roger had gone.

'Goodbye, Roger,' she said to an empty corridor.

*

The Captain strolled along Hawkesbury Mews looking up with distaste at the hastily constructed apartment building presumable erected to service the nursing staff of nearby Darlington Memorial Hospital. He stopped twenty or so yards short of busy, tree lined Woodlands Road. He did not have to wait long before he was approached by the gaunt, filthy figure of the dreadlocked delinquent.

The Captain raised an eyebrow. 'Well, Flowers?' he said.

'It's done.'

'Excellent.' The Captain reached inside his coat and pulled out a brown envelope. 'Consider yourself

reinstated,' he said handing the envelope to Flowers. 'Now feel free to get yourself cleaned up. Some new clothes. A haircut, perhaps.'

Flowers smiled thinly, accepted the envelope and strode towards the busy main road.

The Captain's mobile vibrated against his chest. He took it out, looked at the screen, a Darlington number. Pressing the green button he said, 'Yes?'

'This is Roger Peerson.'

'Ah, Mr Peerson. I was expecting your call.'

'Listen,' said Roger. 'Here's the deal: I stop the Trojans and reinstate as much of your money as possible. I never see Becky Ketteringham again and as long as I send a certain email to a certain address on certain dates, the Trojans stay asleep. But if you harm one hair of her head or come after me for anything at all I swear by my dead son's soul I'll never turn them off again. No matter what you do. And you know they can track and backtrack your cash wherever you try and move it.' Roger took a breath. 'That's the deal,' he said.

The Captain paused to absorb Roger's words and, as he watched Flowers walk away with his curiously slow and long gait, his attention was drawn to a black Mercedes minibus with heavily tinted windows which had stopped in the traffic on the main road. The front passenger window slid down and Kent, after tossing out a lit cigarette, looked directly out at The Captain. The two men exchanged the smallest of smiles as the minibus moved off.

'Very well, Mr Peerson,' said The Captain. 'You

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have a deal.'

The Captain hung up the call and placed the phone back into his inside pocket. 'For now,' he whispered.

THE END

Author's note:

Hope you enjoyed that. I had fun writing it.

All donations welcome to Paypal account gb@bramblingbooks.co.uk - you can send your comments and thoughts to that e-mail address too.

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